Shadow of the Unicorn: The Legacy

Suzanne de Montigny

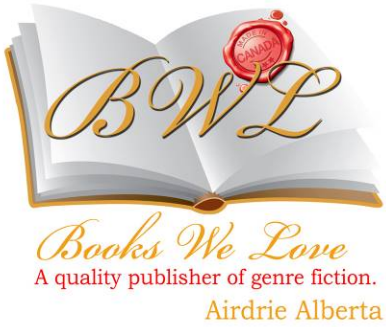
Shadow of the Unicorn: *Legacy*

The Shadow of the Unicorn, Book 1

By Suzanne de Montigny

Digital ISBNs:
EPUB 9781771459204
Kindle 9781771459211
Web/PDF 9781771459228

Print ISBN 9781771459235



Copyright 2015 by Suzanne de Montigny
Cover Art by Michelle Lee

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the publisher of this book

Dedication

To the four loves of my life: my husband, my two boys, and Buddy our bichon frisé.

Author's Note

Half of the author's proceeds from The Shadow of the Unicorn series, will be donated to the Third World Eye Care Society, a group of eye specialists who travel to third world countries delivering thousands of pairs of glasses, and performing eye surgery for free.

Chapter One
The Valley

Azaria strained his skinny legs and pushed his way up the mountain, his white fur glistening with sweat. He puffed hard, drawing in as much air as he could. His father, Polaris, led the way. The unicorn colt admired his father's strong muscles, and the long, spiral ivory horn that crowned his head. He wished he could climb the slope as easily as him, his breath calm as though he were on flat land, instead of groaning and gasping for air.

"Let's stop for a rest," said Polaris.

"All right, if *you* want to," said Azaria, his legs trembling. "I don't really need a break. I'm perfectly fine." The colt collapsed onto his haunches and gulped for more air. He caught a glimpse of a smile when his father turned his face. "What's so funny?" he asked, leaning his head to one side.

"Oh, nothing," said Polaris, straightening his mouth.

The two unicorns rested in the shade of the tall mountain trees. Bird songs echoed in the forest. The aroma of the ferns tickled Azaria's nose, and he sneezed hard between heavy breaths.

"Bless you," said Polaris.

The colt sneezed again.

"Bless you again," he said. His gaze turned to the snow-covered peaks and the valley below.

Azaria followed his father's eyes, and then asked the question that burned inside him. "So why did you bring me here, Father? Just to see the view?"

His father chuckled, and then grew serious. “No. It’s because we’ve been summoned.”

“Summoned?’

“Yes,” said Polaris.

“You mean by that thing that scared the mares this morning?” His heart raced at the memory of the strange, little animal that dashed into the herd, wheezing. About the size of a fox, it looked like no other lizard he’d ever seen – sharp teeth, claws, and even feathers.

“I wasn’t scared at all,” Azaria babbled between breaths. “After all, it was just a funny-looking lizard ... right?” He tilted his head and watched his father, hopeful.

Polaris grinned. “No. He was a messenger – from the dinosaurs.”

“The dinosaurs?” The colt’s eyes grew wide. “You mean like the Rexus?”

Azaria had heard stories about these giant, flesh-eating creatures that shook the ground as they walked, their long tails sweeping behind them. One of them even devoured a unicorn many years before he was born.

“No, not the Rexus.” Polaris said. “Saul, the Great Chief. He’s asked that we leave tomorrow. Says it’s urgent. Apparently there’re strange things going on over there.”

“What’s been happening?” The colt frowned.

“I don’t know yet, but I’m taking *you* with me.”

“What?” Azaria’s ears pricked forward.

“I’m taking *you* with me.” Polaris repeated. “You’re six moons old now, and it’s time you learned as much as you can about our valley and what lies beyond.”

Azaria’s eyes bulged. “But why me?”

“Because you may be leader someday.” Polaris smiled.

“Me? Leader of the unicorns?”

“Yes.”

Azaria looked far below at the white unicorns gathered in the valley. Tingles ran down his spine at the thought of becoming the Great Stallion.

“Look at how many there are – hundreds,” said Polaris, his voice filled with pride.

Azaria squinted at the creatures glistening on the plain, white specks dotting the lush, green banks of the river.

“There’s no other creature as striking,” Polaris said, rising to his full height. “Now look over there.” He pointed his horn to the sunrise end of the valley. “That’s Zeus’ herd.” Then he pointed to where the sun set. “And that’s Solomon’s.”

“There are three herds?” asked Azaria.

Polaris nodded. “And you see that tall mountain?”

Azaria stretched his neck, spying the snow-capped peak in the far distance. “Yeah, I see it.”

“That’s where the dinosaurs dwell. We’re going there tomorrow.”

Azaria’s tail twitched back and forth as visions of magnificent beasts filled his mind … until fear gripped him. “But Father, what if we get eaten by a Rexus?”

“Don’t worry. We’ll stay as far away from them as we can. The valley’s wide, and they only occupy certain areas.”

The colt heaved a sigh of relief, and then furrowed his brows. “Father, why do the Rexus eat other dinosaurs – and unicorns?”

“That’s just how it is. They eat meat. Just like the lions eat zebra.” He lowered his head and broke off a mouthful of grass.

Azaria shuddered. “Zebras? Gross! That’s like eating dead unicorns.”

“Mm-hm.” Polaris mumbled while he chewed.

Azaria continued. “Okay, but if the lions like zebra, then wouldn’t they like unicorn too?”

The stallion swallowed his mouthful of grass, and then answered. “No. They’re afraid of us. They learned long ago a lion is no match for a unicorn. If they attack us, we can kill them with the tips of our horns.”

“So only the Rexus are our enemies?” Azaria asked.

“That’s right.” Polaris rose from his resting spot and shook his coat.

“Then why do the dinosaurs live in the other valley?”

“Because there’s not enough food for us all. We chose to live apart long ago.” He took a few steps forward, heading down the path. “Come on. Let’s go. The sun’s going down. It’s time we joined the herd. Your mother’s waiting.”

Azaria scrambled up, his legs still shaky from the climb. They descended into the valley, picking their way down the steep slopes. The herd grazed peacefully in the late afternoon sun.

He loved this part of the valley where they lived. The grass was tender here, with sweet purple flowers that grew between the tall, green blades. Close by, a small brook meandered to the river. And near the creek, the large banyan tree stood where they all met and cooled themselves on hot days and gathered to sleep at night.

Azaria hurried past the two fillies, Cassi and Jemmi.

“Azaria, come on,” they called, giggling as he ran by like they usually did.

“Not now,” he said, picking up speed despite his fatigue. He spied his mother, Aurora, nearby. “Mother, have you seen Gaelan?”

Aurora raised her head, eyes shining as she gazed at her son. “No, but you’re a clever colt. You’ll find him. Just look around.”

Not always clever.

He remembered the sharp nip on his rump he'd earned after an ill-fated plan the other day.

Then it came – Azaria heard the loud neigh he was waiting for.

"Looking for me?" Gaelan came bounding up to his friend. "What happened? What did you see?" He cantered in circles around Azaria, nearly tripping over his own hooves.

Azaria tried not to laugh. It wasn't Gaelan's fault he was clumsy. He just had really long legs. He shared his story about his day on the mountain.

"So that was a *dinosaur* this morning? Whoa!" Gaelan bounced as he chattered. "And he says something strange has been going on?"

"Yeah," Azaria said. "And Father says he's taking me there tomorrow."

"Wow! Can I come too?"

"You never know. I could ask him."

"Yes!" Gaelan kicked his back hooves out. "That'd be so wild! Hey, let's play dinosaurs and unicorns. I'll be the Rexus."

"But I don't want to be eaten." Azaria scowled. "Unless I can kill you first."

"But I don't want to be killed."

"Okay, you can eat me first, and then I can kill you," said Azaria.

"Okay."

The two colts played together until the shadows grew long and their eyes heavy. The sunset was bold that night. Bright oranges and golds filled the sky. Azaria curled up close to his dam under the banyan tree. He just couldn't wait until the next day, but for now, he needed to sleep.

Chapter Two
The Dinosaurs

The rising sun stretched its golden tendrils across the earth, warming the cool land when Polaris whispered to Azaria the next morning, “Wake up. It’s time to go.”

Azaria grumbled and turned over, and then jerked his head up, struggling to his feet. “I nearly forgot. We’re going to see the dinosaurs!” He shook the dew off his coat. “Can we take Gaelan?”

Polaris closed one eye and pressed his lips together in thought. “Well…” he said, “alright. After all, he may be a leader someday too, plus it’d be good for you both to learn how to speak to these creatures. Let’s go get him.”

Father and colt crept on quiet hooves to where the other young unicorn slept, curled beneath his dam.

“Gaelan,” whispered Azaria as loud as he could, nearly hissing with excitement. “We’re going to the dinosaur’s valley!” The colt stirred a bit. Azaria nudged his friend with his nose and whispered louder, “And he says you can come too!”

The slumbering colt shot up and stumbled sideways. Shaking his mane and snorting, he turned to his dam, his eyes pleading, “Can I please, Mother?”

Elissa nodded, and the two colts bounded after Polaris, prancing and nickering softly so as not to wake the other foals.

The sun had journeyed slightly over the horizon, painting the sky a gentle hue and awakening the colors throughout the valley. Warm steam escaped the unicorns’ nostrils. Azaria shivered, but dared not complain for

fear his father would decide him too young for the long trek. As the sun rose higher into the sky, its comforting warmth felt good on his back. After a while, he began to observe changes along the way.

“Gaelan, have you noticed there are a lot more ferns here? And look, pine trees,” said Azaria.

“Yeah. I wonder why,” said Gaelan, stretching his head up to take it all in.

“It’s dinosaur food,” said Polaris. “Nothing tastier to a dinosaur ... except if you’re a Rexus.”

Azaria quivered at his father’s words.

“And look, there aren’t many birds around here either. I don’t even hear one singing,” said Gaelan.

“How weird,” said Azaria.

They soon found out why when a loud shriek filled the air, and a small, terrified bird fled past their heads, screeching and batting its wings.

“Wha ...?” exclaimed Azaria.

Swooping down from a tall tree, a large, winged reptile pursued its tiny prey. The two colts bolted. Azaria scrambled into the brush, trembling while the triumphant creature captured the bird in his sharp claws and continued on its way. Breathing hard, Azaria waited.

“It’s okay, boys. You can come out now,” called Polaris. “It’s just a flying dinosaur. All it eats is birds.”

“Are you sure?” Gaelan asked.

“Yes. It’s not interested in either of you. You’re both too big.”

Azaria peeked through the leaves, his eyes wide, and then crept out. “A flying dinosaur? Is that all?” he said, acting nonchalant. “I wasn’t the slightest bit scared. I just thought I saw some good leaves in that bush.

They’re really tasty, you know. Have you tried some?” He scanned the sky again, ready to spring should the winged creature return.

Polaris grinned. “No thanks. But keep watching.”

Gaelan cautiously emerged from the bush covered in brambles and mud, his tail between his legs. As they continued on their way, he skulked after them, avoiding their gaze.

Azaria waited for his friend to catch up. “It’s okay, Gaelan,” he whispered. “I was scared too.”

Peeking at his friend from the corner of his eye, Gaelan said, “Thanks.”

When the sun was at its highest point, they rounded a corner into the new valley. Azaria caught his breath. Waterfalls cascaded over cliffs of white stone, moistening the air with its mist. Carpets of fern painted the valley a lush green, while what seemed like thousands of flowers scented the air with delicate fragrances. But more breathtaking still, was the huge herd of horned dinosaurs that grazed on the emerald grass.

Azaria stared, his mouth gaping. These great beasts were splendid. They were huge, magnificent, and –

“They’re just like us!” he exclaimed.

“What do mean just like us?” Gaelan sidled up to his friend, keeping a wary eye on the creatures before him.

“Because look ... they eat grass and travel in herds like we do, and they have dams and babies too,” Azaria said.

“Oh yeah,” said Gaelan.

Azaria discovered they weren’t the only ones surprised. The young dinosaurs gazed at them with round eyes too, ducking behind their dams.

Chuckling, he said, “How can they be so frightened when they’re twice our size?”

“Because they’re just babies,” said Polaris.

“Aw, they’re so cute!” cried Gaelan.

Taking slow, deliberate steps, Azaria approached the young ones. They scattered from his path, making strange grunting noises. He exchanged smiles with Gaelan.

An older dinosaur with strong plates surrounding his face, and wisdom in his eyes stepped forward. The adult dinosaurs made way for the large beast.

“He must be the chief,” whispered Azaria, stealing behind his father.

Polaris’ lips twitched with amusement at the colts’ antics. “Now watch, boys. When you speak to a dinosaur, you must be very formal. Copy what I do.” As the chief approached, the stallion bowed low. “Saul,” he said, “it’s been a very long time. I’m honoured to be in your presence again.”

The dinosaur returned the bow with sincerity. “Ah, Polaris! It *has* been many months since we have seen one another. The honour is mine. I’m glad you came so quickly after my summons.”

“Yes, I knew it was important,” Polaris’ said, his gaze falling on the two colts. “And I brought someone to meet you. This is my son, Azaria, and his friend, Gaelan. I’m hoping they’ll be leaders one day.”

The noble dinosaur bowed to the wide-eyed colts. “It is my pleasure to make your acquaintance, oh future leaders.” He smiled. “Someday, we may negotiate great things together.”

Imitating Saul, Azaria bowed. Gaelan followed suit, stumbling a little. They watched Polaris for more cues.

Saul veered away, tipping his head in a forward direction. Azaria, with Gaelan in tow, stepped high after the old chief, trying to look as grown-up as possible.

Saul’s heavy legs thudded, shaking the earth as he led the unicorns through the valley. “There are many different kinds of dinosaurs, young colts,” he said. “See the tiny ones over there? They’re no larger than a jackal.”

Azaria recognized the messenger who’d appeared the morning before. Clearing his throat, he spoke in his most respectful voice, “Yes, they are very impressive, Chief Saul.”

“Whoa, look at that one,” Gaelan whispered. “What’s that thing on its head? And get a load of the sound it makes when it calls to the others!”

“Yeah. And those ones over there have three horns. Wonder what they need that many for?” asked Azaria.

“I don’t know, but it’d be kind of neat to have a couple more horns, though. Just think of all the damage we could do!”

Azaria’s eyes wandered to where dark, ominous caves stood in the mountain. “Honourable sir, does anything live there?” he asked, keeping his voice steady despite the shiver that ran up his spine.

Saul cast a wary eye in the direction of the caves. “No one ever goes there,” he said, his voice quiet. “And you’d be wise to stay away from them too. That’s where the Rexus live.”

They scurried past, keeping at a fast trot until they reached a grassy field at the edge of the forest where they came upon a new herd of dinosaurs.

“They’re gigantic!” exclaimed Azaria.

“Yes, they are. These are the largest of all the dinosaurs, but there is something ...” Saul turned to Polaris, wearing an expression of concern. “Polaris, I wonder what you would make of this?”

“What, Saul?” Polaris wrinkled his brow and moved a little closer to the chief.

Saul lowered his voice. “We have a young dinosaur within this herd that has a strange affliction. Perhaps you have seen something like this before.”

Azaria cocked his head to hear better.

“What sort of affliction?” asked Polaris, following Saul’s lead and speaking softly.

“Well, he tells us strange things. It’s most peculiar.” The chief frowned.

“May I inquire as to what?” asked Polaris.

“Well ... come, and see for yourself.” Saul turned and led them away.

Azaria was quick to fall in line behind the two adults. Curious to meet this most odd dinosaur, he wondered if it were sick or maybe had three legs instead of four. He had heard of a unicorn born with only three legs once.

They followed the old chief further into the forest where the tall dinosaurs seemed to reach the sky as they munched leaves. The old chief sought out a particularly lofty female and called her. She lowered her head to Saul’s level. Her kind eyes drew Azaria in as he listened to her musical voice.

“Hello, Saul. What brings the most graceful unicorns to us today?”

“Maresa, this is Polaris. He wanted us to meet his son Azaria and his friend Gaelan,” Saul said, a smile curving his lips.

Maresa let out a tinkling laugh. “You are most welcome here, little ones.”

“Thank you,” both colts answered at once.

Saul’s brow furrowed. “Maresa, I wonder if we could speak to your son, Darius.”

Maresa hesitated, and then swung her head back and called him. Hearing his mother, Darius trundled over and stopped short, digging his heels into the earth. His eyes were wide with fright and his breath came in short gasps. He turned to run, halted, and gawked once more at the unicorns as though they were the strangest creatures he had ever seen. Then he trotted to the chief, and stood before him, his breath puffing. Azaria stifled a giggle.

“It’s okay, Darius. They’re just unicorns. They live in the next valley,” Saul said.

The little dinosaur stood as though baffled, staring them up and down. “So it’s happening? The world’s going to change now?” He gulped.

Azaria frowned at his mysterious words.

“What do you mean, Darius?” asked Polaris.

The small dinosaur’s eyes grew distant. “I keep dreaming that the world is different,” he said.

Maresa spoke up. “He gets this look in his eyes, and then he’s gone. We can’t talk to him because he doesn’t hear us. And when he comes to, he tells these strange tales.”

“What sort of tales?” asked Polaris.

“Tell him, Darius.” Maresa nudged him with her giant muzzle.

The little dinosaur sat on his haunches. “Well, there’ll be a cloud over everything and most of the plants will disappear,” he said. “A lot of animals will die too. But there’ll be new ones to replace them, creatures that walk on two legs like the Rexus. And one of them, the Ishmael, will be very dangerous.”

Polaris locked eyes with Saul, but not a word passed between them.

“And how will we know when all of this will begin?” asked Polaris.

“I don’t know when ... just soon.”

“Alright, thank you, Darius. You may leave now. Maresa, it’s been a pleasure.” He nodded his head, dismissing her.

The two leaders eyed each other once more, and as though on cue, moved away to speak in private. Darius trundled toward the lake as though nothing unusual had happened.

“I wonder if he’s a seer,” whispered Azaria.

“What’s a seer?” asked Gaelan.

“I heard the mares talking about them once. They have visions of things before they happen,” said Azaria.

“Maybe he just has dreams or something,” suggested Gaelan. “I know I have some really weird ones sometimes. Like last week, I dreamed that my mom had grown elephant’s feet.”

Azaria let out a loud chuckle. Then, seeing Darius in the distance, he said, “Wanna follow Darius to the lake?”

The young dinosaur stood watching them on the shore, hopeful.

“Sure.”

The two colts broke into a canter. Darius splashed his cumbersome body into the lake, the unicorns close behind. They chased him through the cool water, but were soon breathing hard.

“He might be a dinosaur, but he’s a pretty fast swimmer,” said Azaria.

“Hey, where did he go?” Gaelan looked around.

“I don’t know. He was just here.”

Darius bobbed up behind Gaelan. “Boo!” he shouted,

Gaelan jumped.

The unicorns paddled as hard as they could to escape, but it was no use.

“He’s too fast for us,” said Azaria, slowing his pace. He turned and let Darius catch up, the three creatures standing in a watery circle, panting like dogs.

“You guys are fun,” said Darius, between breaths. “I’m glad we’ll be able to play all the time soon.”

“Well ... actually ... we’re going home,” said Gaelan.

“Yeah, but later,” insisted the little dinosaur.

The two colts shared a puzzled look. Azaria wanted to explain they lived far away, but before he could utter the words, he caught sight of his sire in the distance. “Look, my father’s leaving!”

The two leaders had strolled toward the entrance to the valley, and were bowing to one another. Azaria and Gaelan hurried to join them, careful to imitate Polaris’ gestures. The sun lay low in the sky and strange night sounds crept their way into the landscape.

“Thank you, Saul. It has been a fine day and we will now be on our way,” said Polaris.

“It has indeed.” Saul gave a warm smile to the colts. “I look forward to seeing all of you one day soon.”

“As we do,” replied Polaris.

Saul turned to leave, his huge feet thumping as he returned to the valley.

As the distance grew between the unicorns and Saul, Azaria asked, “So, how did we do? Were we serious enough?”

“You were, but we better hurry before the sun sets completely,” warned Polaris. “We don’t want to be anyone’s supper.”

Fear gripped Azaria. “I thought you said we had no enemies.”

“That’s during the day. At night, it’s a whole different story. We can’t see too well in the dark. We’re safer in the herd,” he explained.

Azaria quickened his pace. As the night sounds swelled louder and louder, his hair stood on end. But soon, the weird and wonderful noises of the dinosaur’s valley faded in the distance, and the familiar sounds of their

own territory drifted in once again. Azaria was relieved to find the herd huddled together for the night under the banyan tree. Seeking out Aurora, he cuddled against her, excited to tell her of all that he had seen that day, and especially of his strange new friend, Darius.

“He thinks everything will change, Mother. Do you think maybe he was a seer?”

Aurora nuzzled her colt. “I think he’s a very young dinosaur having nightmares. I wouldn’t worry about it. He’ll soon forget it, and everything will still be the same. You’ll see,” she said as Azaria’s eyelids drooped, heavy with sleep. But Azaria wasn’t so sure.

Chapter Three
The Meeting

“Quick! It’s going to start!” Jemmi cried.

Azaria pranced, pawing the air with his hooves. For days, he had watched unicorn messengers travel to and fro to the various parts of the valley, announcing the gathering. He had waited far too long for this. His heart leaping, he watched the unicorns march together in their respective herds to the spot in the middle of the valley where the river ran shallowest. There, they were met by Mohala, the eldest of all the unicorns.

“She frightens me,” whispered Cassi.

“Me too,” said Jemmi, cringing at the aged unicorn’s fierce expression.

“Shhh. We better listen,” said Azaria, noting her pale blue eyes roving over the herd as though searching out anyone who dared show disrespect.

“Hail unicorns,” Mohala’s raspy, ancient voice rumbled, demanding their attention. “Great leaders: Solomon, Zeus, and Polaris, we have assembled here today as one great herd to hear the Great Stallion’s words.”

The three herds pointed their horns toward the matriarch in respect while Polaris stepped forward into the center of the group.

“Unicorns, I have seen and heard something that may involve us all – something that may change our lives forever.” He paused, as though heavy in thought, and then continued, “Azaria, Gaelan, and I recently traveled to the dinosaur’s valley where we met Saul, their eminent leader. He introduced us to a most unusual young dinosaur named Darius, who told us some very troubling tales.”

Azaria heard a soft murmur of interest sweep over the herd.

“He speaks of a new world, one that is remarkably different from the one we inhabit today. He talks of change, of a great cloud, of many animals dying, of disappearing plants, and most disturbing of all, of a new creature that walks on two legs like the Rexus, the fiercest of whom is known as the Ishmael.”

The unicorns mumbled, their voices anxious.

“More monster dinosaurs?” whinnied one of the mares.

“We’ll have to move!” shouted a male.

“But this is our home!” cried another mare.

“Silence!” Mohala bellowed in her authoritative voice.

The neighs and whinnies died away. Azaria and Gaelan exchanged frightened glances.

Polaris continued. “We have strong reason to believe that this young dinosaur is a seer, and has had visions of the future.”

“I was right,” whispered Azaria to Gaelan.

“Therefore, I suggest we all keep watch for any of these changes, and especially for the Ishmael. Should you see any signs of the things discussed, report it to your leader immediately. But most importantly, stay close to one another, for if any of you is harmed, you will need someone close by to cure you.”

“Cure us? What does he mean?” Azaria said to Gaelan.

“I don’t know.”

The herd exchanged nervous words until Mohala silenced them once again with her loud, raspy voice.

“The Great Stallion has spoken. You will now join me in vowing our allegiance to our leader.” She paused a moment, and then began the chant they all knew so well. “We *will* fulfill his wishes.”

The unicorns recited in unison. “We *will* fulfill his wishes. We *will* fulfill his wishes. We *will* fulfill his wishes.”

After the words faded away, Mohala addressed them once again. “And now, many full moons have passed since our herds last came together. I suggest that we all take the time to enjoy one another’s company.” Her aged face nearly cracked when she smiled, announcing. “Let us begin the revelry!”

“Wahoo!” cried Azaria, galloping toward his friends. Springing into action, the four foals bolted to the river’s edge. Gaelan pounced into the water, dousing his buddies with cold water.

“I’m going to get you for that,” shouted Azaria.

He galloped quick as lightening toward Gaelan, only to be smacked in the face with icy water. Cassi and Jemmi laughed so hard, tears streamed from their eyes. They leapt in too, and soon they all ran and splattered each other along the river.

The arrival of loud, thudding hooves made them turn.

“Hey, it’s Zackary and Nathaniel,” shouted Azaria at the arrival of his two cousins. “Hi you guys!”

The two newcomers passed them by as they plowed right through the river, soaking the other foals.

“Why you ...” shouted Gaelan, his long legs shortening the distance between them fast. Nathaniel and Zackary’s loud whinnies pierced the air. Gaelan whizzed past them, spraying them with his back hooves.

The young unicorns frolicked, shoving each other under the water, giggling, and stumbling. Soon their sides were heaving and they stopped, their breathless laughter mixing with gasps for air.

“I have a good idea,” said Nathaniel, still puffing.

“What?” the fillies both asked at once.

“Let’s go spy on the grownups.” His brows wiggled with mischief.

“I don’t know –” Azaria began.

“Yeah!” cried the others, their eyes filled with glee.

They crept toward the adult unicorns, careful to make a long arc around Mohala. Hiding themselves behind some bushes close to the mares, they eavesdropped.

“Cassi and Jemmi are so fast. They’re such tom colts,” bragged their dam.

The two fillies shared a smile.

Dorianna, Nathaniel’s dam spoke up, “Well, you should see how quick Nathaniel can gallop. He’s definitely the fastest of the colts in *our* herd.”

Nathaniel cleared his throat a little and wagged his head from side to side.

“Well, my Zackary is a close second,” claimed his dam.

Zackary shot Nathaniel a smirk.

“Well, Gaelan can beat any other colt if he had the chance,” bragged Elissa. “You’ve all seen his long legs. He’s made for speed.”

Azaria frowned. “Hey, how come no one’s saying anything nice about me? I’m gonna go listen to the males.”

He crept away on the soft, silent grass to where the stallions had gathered, the foals following close on his heels, and listened.

“You know, I once ate some crabgrass and I was sick for days,” said an elderly male.

“I tried an apple once,” added a chubby stallion, “and it was mighty delicious, but the gas afterwards? Phew! What a smell!”

The foals stifled their laughter.

“I wonder what the new plants will do to us all, eh?” someone said.

“I don’t know, but it can’t be as bad as Clarence when he ate that apple!”

The males rolled back, hee-hawing and guffawing.

After the laughter died, Orpheus, the ancient unicorn, renowned for his storytelling, spoke. “Well, I once journeyed to the dinosaurs’ valley myself, and what I saw, was enough to make anyone’s hair stand on end.”

The young foals came out of hiding and gathered around him, knowing it would be an exquisite tale.

Orpheus began. “It was a night much like this one, when the full moon rides across the night sky. I knew it would be dangerous traveling on my own and was aware of the strange night beasts that attack tender unicorns when they’re alone, but I was young and thought myself invincible.”

“I made it to the valley with little effort other than my own strength and agility, and was met by the Great Chief himself. We spoke of many things, and I soon grew very comfortable as the grass there was mighty sweet, and I was enjoying a small feast. But the chief noted the shadows were growing long, and gave me fair warning. He said, ‘Be careful, Orpheus. There have been strange things seen at night, and eerie sounds heard. You should leave now before the dark.’’

“My heart racing, I immediately rose, but the sun fell faster than I expected. I couldn’t turn back because I knew the little mare wanted me home, so I kept going. As I walked, I was relieved the sounds were just the normal night noises one hears on a summer’s eve, and soon lost all worry. But when I came to an escarpment, I heard a voice. Soft at first, it grew louder and louder. It was like the moaning of a mare in great pain. I stopped dead, my heart pounding in my chest, and nearly turned to flee. But then I thought, “It’s just another unicorn, and by the sounds of it, she needs my help.”

Azaria sat up and moved his head forward to listen more intently.

“It was a terrible cry – the sound of gurgling and rasping as though someone was badly injured. I called out to see where she was, but there was no answer, just the agonized moaning, so I continued to search until suddenly, to my horror, I saw her. She was floating off the ground and, like a shadow, I could see right through her. She was ...” his voice dropped to a whisper, “a unicorn ghost!”

His audience gasped.

“My first impulse was to gallop away as fast as my hooves could carry me, but instead, I overcame my fear and faced her. After all, a unicorn could certainly handle a mere spirit.”

Orpheus paused to catch his breath.

“She wasn’t the terrifying spectre I always imagined a ghost to be. Her eyes were sad, and if anything, she looked ill. I asked her what happened and she replied between groans, ‘I came to the dinosaurs’ valley many years ago, but became lost searching for the right trail that would take me home. And then I slipped and tumbled down an embankment, breaking my back from the fall. There was no one close by to help me, and so I died, and now I am cursed to haunt this place until the end of time.’ And then she faded from my sight.”

“My fur standing on end, I galloped home as quickly as possible hoping to forget it ever happened. For days, I couldn’t sleep, and for moons afterward, I jumped at the slightest night sound. After a few years, I forgot about her, my life returning to normal, but sometimes … late at night … I think I can still hear her cries of pain and her anguished words as I drift off to sleep.”

The unicorns sighed at the close of his tale.

Jemmi and Cassi crept closer to Azaria. “Did *you* hear any strange sounds when you were in the dinosaurs’ valley?” asked Cassi.

“No, of course not,” Azaria said.

“Yes, we did,” interrupted Gaelan, his eyes bulging. “A sort of a whooshing sound.”

Azaria glanced at Gaelan, confused, and then turned to the fillies, popping out his eyes too. “Yeah, and a creaking and groaning noise too.”

“Come to think of it, didn’t we see something sort of white?” asked Gaelan.

“Yes, I think so. And it kind of waved in the wind,” said Azaria, making his voice sound as scary as he could.

The fillies backed away slowly, their eyes wide as cabbages.

“I think it was trying to speak.” Gaelan said, the corners of his mouth twitching with a hint of smile.

The sudden sound of voices in the distance broke the spell.

“Hey, they’re singing,” cried Jemmi. “Let’s go join them.”

“Yeah,” said Cassi, turning to leave.

The foals mumbled with excitement as they settled in for the singsong with the other unicorns.

Dorianna, Nathaniel’s dam, neighed in her high-pitched voice. Other mares whinnying, joined her. The males added sneezes and rumbles to the rhythm. Together, they sneezed, rumbled, whinnied, and neighed, their unicorn voices carrying into the night. Other animals joined in too, the wolves and jackals howling along, while the birds squawked their part to the song.

Azaria thought it was the most beautiful sound he had ever heard. He couldn’t remember having had such a wonderful time in his whole life. He wished it would never end ... but it did, all in an instant, when a loud,

hissing sound filled the air. The singing stopped dead as the unicorns looked up, their eyes filled with horror.

Chapter Four
The Great Fireball

“A giant fireball!” cried Azaria.

The unicorns stared in silence, their mouths gaping.

A huge boulder burned and hissed as it hurled through the air toward the earth. Sparks flew everywhere, threatening to ignite the grasslands of the valley. The giant rock whizzed through the heavens until it disappeared from sight. The herd waited, but nothing happened. Several seconds later, a loud crash thundered far in the distance and the ground shook. Azaria’s body slammed into a boulder.

The unicorns erupted into panicked neighs. “It’s what the dinosaur predicted!” shouted a male.

“There’ll be monsters on two legs!” cried a female, her thin voice piercing the air.

Azaria struggled to get up. He pushed with his forelegs, but a sharp pain shot through his hip.

“Mother,” he called, “I can’t get up ... Mother?” He listened for the reassuring sound of her voice over the cries of the others, but couldn’t hear her.

“What if there’s another one?” screamed a hysterical mare. “The valley will burn!”

“Quiet! All of you,” Mohala’s thunderous voice shouted over the frightened crowd. “We are unicorns, *not* hyenas. You will *all* stop the hysterics.” When the noise subsided except for a few sobs. Mohala continued. “Now stand at attention and listen to Polaris, the Great Stallion.”

Polaris appeared before his herd looking shaken. “Unicorns, I believe what we just witnessed *could* be the beginning of the change young Darius spoke of. I hoped it wouldn’t happen so soon, but here we are. And now we must be strong and stand united, swallowing our fear, for it’s our fear, not the fireball that threatens to destroy us. We have three strong herds and I know we can survive this. Now let’s begin by helping those in need, and from there, we’ll decide what to do.”

Azaria felt soothed, yet confused by his father’s words. He struggled to rise again, but rolled back to the ground in pain.

“Father!” he called, “I’m here. I can’t get up.”

Aurora and Polaris dashed by his side.

“What happened?” asked Aurora.

“The earth shook so hard I fell on that sharp rock.” He tried to hoist himself up again. “If I can just get up a little further ...” He groaned. “I could maybe stand.”

“Azaria, stay still!” ordered his mother.

The colt tried again.

“Just stay still!” commanded Polaris.

“No ... I think I can –”

Polaris lunged at Azaria with his horn. The colt fell back, his eyes wide, but the horn settled softly on the very spot that stung. He yelped in pain.

“Stay still!” Aurora repeated.

It came slowly at first – a warmth that grew hotter and hotter until it nearly burned. Azaria squirmed and, just as he was ready to cry out again, the heat subsided and along with it, the pain. Glancing up, he saw his father grin, one eyebrow raised as though they had just shared a very good secret.

“Feeling better?” Polaris asked.

“How did you do that?”

“A new lesson for you, my son,” he said. “Healing! Something you’ll be able to do once you get your horn.”

“Me? Really?” Azaria rose slowly, testing his hip, astounded by the small miracle. Then something caught his eye. “Mother, that mare has cut her head and ... oh, look ... that one’s bleeding really hard! What if she dies?” He tottered to the first mare, still cautious of his injury.

“Just watch, Azaria,” Aurora said, coming up beside him.

Again, he was dumfounded when his mother touched her horn to the wound and the gash in the mare’s head miraculously sealed itself.

Azaria looked around at the scene of destruction in awe as the unicorns tended to one another. Ever so gently, Dorianna, Nathaniel’s dam, ambled to the bleeding mare, and laid her horn on the gash. The bleeding stopped, and the mare calmly rose and joined the group.

“Now you know why we have to stick together,” said his mother, “in case something happens. It’s how we survive.”

A feeling of brotherhood filled Azaria. “I never knew, Mother. It’s amazing. It’s ... because we’re unicorns.”

“That’s right.” Her smile was serene.

The unicorns continued one by one to find the injured among them, and to heal them. A gash on a leg became new flesh, a broken rib became whole, and a torn ear reshaped itself. They worked hard until near dawn, and then huddled close together to sleep, far from the comfort of the banyan tree.

Azaria trembled as he imagined what the change would bring. Something very large and ominous had struck the earth. Darius’ prophesy echoed in his brain. What did it mean? What would happen now? His

thoughts whirled in his head as he fell into an exhausted sleep. Then, morning crept in again like a cruel, twisted beast. It was the dawn of a new era.

Chapter Five
The Change

The sky was black, and his nostrils stung when Azaria awoke the next morning. He coughed long and hard.

“Mother,” he called, “I can’t breathe. There’s smoke everywhere … and why is it so dark?”

“It’s the change, Azaria,” she said, her voice quivering.

Memories of the events of the night before jolted him. He spun in circles, bewildered, at snow drifting slowly like wispy feathers to the ground. He had heard about this stuff, so soft and cold, and how it would fall to the earth from a grayish-blue sky when the air was chilly. But when he opened his mouth to catch some flakes, neither was it cold, nor did it melt on his tongue.

“This isn’t snow, is it, Mother?” he asked, spitting out the dry, bitter flakes.

“No,” she said. “It’s ash. I’ve seen this before after lightning strikes. It’s what’s left over after things burn.”

He remembered the sparks that flew from the fireball, and then asked, hesitantly, “Mother, when’s the sun going to rise?”

“It’s not,” she said in a tiny voice.

“Why not?”

“Because it’s gone,” she said in the barest of whispers.

“What happened to it?” he asked, his eyes growing wide.

“I don’t know.”

Waiting for her to nuzzle him and tell him everything would be alright, Aurora said instead, “Just stay close to me and the herd, okay?” And then

she turned away.

Azaria didn't like this new side to his mother. She had always been so strong and reassuring, but now she seemed almost as afraid as he was. He rubbed his face on her soft cheek, but she wouldn't look him in the eye.

Unnerved, he turned and searched for Gaelan, who stood shivering close to his dam. His friend jumped, when Azaria approached him from behind.

"Gaelan, there's something really wrong. The sun's gone!"

"I know. I heard the mares talking," Gaelan whispered. "They say it hit the earth last night." His face crumpled, and he burst into tears. "I'm so scared. What are we going to do?"

Azaria was taken aback at Gaelan's cries. "I don't know." His gaze swept over the herd, and he made a quick decision. "Father told us not to be afraid, so let's act like everything's normal, and then maybe we'll feel better."

"Okay." Gaelan sniffed. "I guess if you can do it, I can too."

"Good," said Azaria, speaking as though he were Polaris himself.

In the weeks that followed, the world was cast in darkness. No daylight welcomed dawn, and no gentle moonlight or stars lit up the night sky. The white ash continued to float to the ground, covering the grasses the unicorns needed to survive. They huddled together, scraping through the soot to find any bits of green they could. But, most of what they found was brittle and dry, and so the herd grew thinner by the day. The river banks too were piled high with sludge as it struggled to clean itself of the grunge that had fallen like filthy snow into its life-giving waters. And sadly, the banyan tree where the unicorns gathered, grew grey and collapsed one dreary day.

Equally bad were the nightmares Azaria suffered each night. Spectres of two-legged monsters invaded his dreams, and he often awoke, breathing hard and bathed in sweat.

“Mother,” he whimpered one day, “will the sun ever return? I’m freezing. I’m *always* cold. And I’m hungry. I want food.”

Aurora turned to her foal, her eyes tired and head drooping. “I know. We’re all hungry. I don’t think anyone could have ever imagined the change would be this bad,” she said. “But you know, all bad things have to end. And this surely will, too. Remember what Darius said, that the plants would change?”

“Yeah,” Azaria said, his ears pricked forward at the hope in her voice.

“That means that *something* will grow again, and soon we’ll have food. Then maybe we’ll find another banyan tree for our gathering place. He never said that we wouldn’t survive now, did he?”

“No,” Azaria said, his voice uncertain, “he didn’t. But what if the creatures-that-walk-on-two-legs find us?”

“Don’t think about it. It’ll only frighten you more. Put it out of your mind. It’s the way of the unicorns.”

Azaria knew her words were true, and that he had no choice but to find the strength, if for nothing else, at least for Gaelan.

Yet despite the dismal landscape and the doubt, the foals grew braver each day, drifting further and further from their dams. Sometimes it was to run to the river. At other times, it was to race away without thought into what was once the grassland.

One day, they wandered away to play a game of Hoof the Soot, a contest Gaelan had invented where the foals pushed ashes back with their hooves to make piles.

“Let’s see who can make the biggest one,” said Cassi.

“Mine’s going to be high as a mountain,” bragged Jemmi, sweeping cinders on her mound.

Azaria pawed at the ground, determined to win. He checked Gaelan out of the corner of his eye. Seeing Gaelan’s mound growing quicker than his, Azaria kicked his ashes back faster than ever. Gaelan looked back and paddled feverishly too, the competition between them fierce.

Then small wisps of sand began whipping in patterns around Azaria’s heap.

“Who’s doing that?” he called, his voice accusing. “Gaelan, are you blowing away my dust pile?”

“No!” growled Gaelan, his scornful eyes landing on the twins. “It’s the fillies!”

Azaria glared at Cassi and Jemmi, only to be met by confused expressions. He looked back to his pile. Grains of sand danced through the air as they swirled and rippled away from his mound. He watched, spellbound by the pretty designs.

“It’s the wind!” he said.

The four foals watched the sandy arabesque, fascinated. Then Gaelan made a discovery.

“You know, it’s getting so strong, I think it can pick me up.”

“Me too,” said Jemmi, springing forward.

The foals abandoned their game, leaping higher and higher.

“Wow! I almost flew!” cried Cassi.

“Me too!” exclaimed Jemmi as the wind carried her a short distance.

But soon the delicate breezes took on an ominous new twist.

“Ow, that stings.” Cassi pawed at her eyes with her foreleg.

“What’s happening?” cried Gaelan, rubbing his smarting eyes against his side.

“I don’t know, but we’d better get back to our dams,” called Azaria. He peered in the direction of the mares, but saw only a blur. Terror seized him. “We shouldn’t have gone so far!” he shouted. “It’s all your fault, Gaelan. It was your idea to come out here!”

“Not it wasn’t. It was Jemmi who said we should do it,” snarled Gaelan.

“Was not,” Jemmi shot back.

“Was too,” said Gaelan.

“Never mind. Let’s just go!” Azaria shouted.

He led the way, calling for Aurora. They pressed forward, their eyes tearing as the winds grew stronger. Nearing blindness, Azaria panicked. Soon, large drops of rain pelted down on them to add to their misery.

A loud crack filled the air.

“Watch out!” shrieked Gaelan as a large branch crashed down and nearly struck Jemmi. The filly’s terrified screams pierced the air.

A strong gust of wind knocked down Cassi. Azaria and Gaelan stopped and pushed her back up.

“I don’t think we’ll ever get there,” cried Cassi, tears streaming from her eyes. “I’m just not strong enough.”

“Yes, you are,” yelled Azaria above the noise of the wind. “You’re a unicorn!”

“Yeah, but I’m just a filly!” she wailed.

“Fillies are strong too!” shouted Jemmi.

And that’s when Azaria heard it – the call, weak at first, but very real. “It’s Mother!” he exclaimed.

His strength renewed by the sound of her voice, he plunged forward, the other foals close on his heels. They struggled toward the faint sound. Soot, sand, and rain whipped at their coats, burning their skin. Plowing

ahead, they listened for Aurora's muted call until Azaria saw the dim forms of the mares huddled before him. The foals rushed forward to meet them.

"Quickly, we must find shelter. The cave is over there," ordered Aurora, her voice choked.

"Where? I can't see!" shouted Azaria over the din.

Aurora pointed her horn in the opposite direction. Azaria couldn't make out the cavern, but put all his faith in his mother's words. They pressed through the hurling winds staggering as they went, their eyes closed in slits until the howling winds finally grew muffled.

Opening his eyes a little wider, Azaria took in his surroundings. Smooth stone walls enclosed them, and though it was dark, he knew they had arrived safe inside the cave.

He listened to the savage howls of the winds that tossed the lands about. "It's so loud, Mother. When will it stop?" he asked.

"I don't know, Azaria," she said, her voice wobbly.

His heart sped at his mother's uncertainty. Why couldn't she fix everything like she did before?

The foals huddled with the herd, as the storm thundered around them. No one played, and no one spoke. After a while, they fell into a fretful sleep until a loud neigh awakened them.

"The winds are dying down," called Mohala.

Azaria sprang from the floor of the cave and strained to see. It was true. The winds had abated. The storm was nearly over.

The unicorns shuffled about the cave, nickering until the skies grew calm again. Then, one by one, they left.

Azaria stared in disbelief at what he could see of the devastation in their dark world. The storm had been so powerful it had uprooted trees and

flattened them like twigs, leaving a desolate landscape.

“Look,” cried Gaelan. “The winds blew away a lot of the soot. Now maybe we can find food.” He leapt out, his long legs pounding the earth as he galloped.

“Gaelan, come back,” shouted Elissa.

“Food!” cried the unicorns as they darted out onto the plains, prancing and leaping, and wandering further and further from the cave.

Azaria sprang forward too.

“No, Azaria. Let’s wait,” cried his mother. “I don’t think it’s safe yet. I’ve heard of storms that sleep, and then reawaken.”

She was right. Within minutes, the storm surrounded them once more in all its fury.

Azaria and his mother fled back into the cave, Elissa close behind. The frantic whinnies of their fellow unicorns fighting to return pierced the air.

Noting the concerned expression on Elissa’s face, Azaria whispered. “Mother, what if Gaelan doesn’t make it?”

“That’s what I’m worried about too. We’ve got to help him,” she said. “Try calling him. Your voice is higher than Elissa’s and will carry further on the wind.”

“Alright, Mother. I will.” Standing as close to the mouth of the cave as he could, he called and called, but nothing happened. He shot Aurora a worried glance.

“Try again,” she said.

Azaria raised his voice as high as he could and called even louder.

Then something big flew into the cave, a tangle of legs. It rolled around a couple of times, and then clambered up on all fours.

“Gaelan!” Azaria exclaimed.

“Phew, that was close!” His friend gasped for breath.

“What happened?” asked Elissa, her eyes still moist.

“I ran out to get some grass. And then, when I saw the storm was starting again, I galloped as fast as I could. I wasn’t sure if I was going the right way, but then I heard Azaria calling me, so I knew I was. And then, all of a sudden, I was here.”

“It’s those long legs that saved you,” said Elissa, laughing through tears.

They waited and called a while longer, guiding the unicorns back. When all seemed to have arrived, the herd stayed put until they knew for certain the storm was really over. Remaining close for many days afterwards, no one ventured far from the shelter.

“Gaelan,” Azaria whispered a few days later, “have you noticed there are some unicorns missing?”

“Yeah. I heard they were taken by the storm,” said his friend in a hushed voice. “Some of the older ones weren’t able to get back when the winds began again.”

Azaria’s heart fell. He remembered the group of older unicorns who hung together and reminisced about days gone by, particularly the males they had spied on the night of the revelry. Some of them were gone, and those who remained, hung their heads in sadness.

He recalled his father’s words that day on the mountain. The unicorns had no enemies save for the Rexus.

But what about the skies?

It wasn’t the last of the storms. They came and went, each time taking victims. Azaria was alarmed as the remaining herds grew gaunt, their ribs protruding from their sides from starvation.

Then one day, the skies began to grow brighter, the smoke thinned, and small seedlings rose from the ash. It was spring.

Chapter Six
Darius

Head held high, his eyes shining, Gaelan galloped toward Azaria, kicking his heels in the air. He gradually slowed and came to a stop right before him, his eyes lit up.

“You look pretty happy,” Azaria said, amused. “What’s up?”

“Ahhhhh, it’s those delicious, tender shoots of grass growing. They’re so good. I just can’t get enough of them.” He pranced. “And did you notice? It’s warmer and the sky is *so* much lighter.”

“I know. And look how much we’ve grown. We’re done with starving.” Azaria hooves danced. “And we’re yearlings now! See? I’m getting my horn!” He bent his head down to show off the stub of his sprouting bud.

“Me too!” said Gaelan, bowing his head to reveal the small growth. “Did you know the other day I actually healed my mother when she scratched herself on a dead branch? It was a little difficult because my horn isn’t very long yet, but I *did* it.”

“Me too!” Azaria exclaimed. “I healed Jemmi when she fell and twisted her ankle. I had to practically stand on my head to do it, but it worked.”

The colts threw their heads back and laughed, shaking their manes. Then Gaelan grew serious.

“Azaria? Have you noticed there are no new foals?” he asked.

“Yeah, I did. Mother says when there’s no food, there are no foals. It’s the way of nature.”

“Really? But what if the mares never have any again?”

“I don’t know,” said Azaria, “Father says we need foals to survive. Otherwise everyone will just grow old and die.”

Gaelan thought for a moment. “Too bad we can’t talk to Darius. He’d know what’s going to happen.”

“Yeah. But he’s pretty far away, and it’s not really safe to go there yet. Plus, there’s still the Rexus.” Azaria cocked his head. “But I could ask my father. After all, he *is* the Great Stallion.”

“Good idea! And see if I can come too,” said Gaelan.

“Alright.” Azaria nodded.

It was evening when he got up the nerve to approach his sire, walking as tall he could and holding his head high.

“You look so grown up,” said his father. “I almost didn’t know it was you.

The colt’s lips curled up in a sheepish smile.

“Father … I think we should go the other valley and see if Darius has been having any of his spells,” he blurted. “I want to know what’s going to happen next.”

Polaris sighed. “I’ve been thinking that too.”

“Seriously? So we can go?” Azaria tried his hardest to contain his excitement.

“Well ... I’m just afraid of what I might find. The dinosaurs are huge animals, and I’m not so sure they fared well.”

“But can we at least go see?” Azaria pleaded.

“I don’t know.” Polaris pressed his lips together and looked away.

“After all, it’s for the good of the unicorns.” Azaria put on his speaking-to-Saul voice. He waited. When Polaris refrained from answering, he turned to leave, his head lowered. He had walked no more than a few paces when his sire called out.

“We’ll see.”

“Yes!” Azaria exclaimed, leaping into a gallop. He ran to tell Gaelan the news, cantering in circles around him.

“Did he say *I* could come?” asked Gaelan, joining his friend’s frolicking.

“I forgot to ask, but if he says we can go, I’ll ask him for you too.”

The next day, Azaria’s chance came when Polaris stood before the herd and made the announcement. “I’ve decided I’m going to find Darius.”

Sighs of relief resounded throughout the unicorns.

“May fair weather go with you,” an older mare called out.

“And may you find Darius in good health,” cried a male.

“I’ll do the best I can,” said Polaris, nodding.

Azaria leapt forward. “Father, what about me? I want to come too.”

“I don’t think so, Azaria. I’ve thought about it, and it’s too dangerous.”

“But Father, it’ll be dangerous if *you* go alone. You were the one who said we should all stay together in case something happens. And we could bring Gaelan too. After all, you did teach us both how to speak to the dinosaurs.”

“It’s true, Polaris.” Aurora said. “You shouldn’t go alone. Azaria and Gaelan have shown a lot of courage during these hard times. I think you should bring them along. And besides, what good will they do around here?”

Polaris eyed the two eager young yearlings. “Alright, then,” he said. “Come on.”

The trip was vastly different from the first time they made the trek. Vicious storms had uprooted the once-majestic trees, and windfall littered the ground. The stench of mold and rot assaulted their nostrils while they trudged through the mire. Large puddles stretched long arms around the

terrain like claws, making the journey all the longer as they navigated around the deep waters. But the worst part was the mosquitoes that tormented them. They shook their coats repeatedly to rid themselves of the annoying insects that feasted on their blood, only to have them return moments later.

Hearing the pitiful sound of a mournful bird crying for its mate, Azaria recalled the fright they encountered on their first trip. “Better watch out for the flying dinosaurs,” he joked. But none came. He glanced around. “Gosh, they’re no birds around for real this time.”

“No trees to build their nests in,” Polaris said, looking back.

Azaria frowned.

They trudged through the mud until at last they arrived at the opening of the valley. Though he was tired, Azaria’s pace quickened, but when they rounded the corner, his heart fell. It was far worse than he had imagined. Hundreds of skeletons and bones lay scattered on the ground where dinosaurs had breathed their last breath.

“They’re all gone!” cried Gaelan, his eyes wide with disbelief at what had become a massive graveyard.

“You were right, Father.” Azaria’s voice trembled. “They just didn’t have enough food.”

He fought to keep the tears back. He wouldn’t cry – he just wouldn’t. Looking about, he wished that somehow Saul would make an appearance, that somehow there had been a mistake, and that just around the bend he might come upon the long-necks. Scanning the skies again for flying dinosaurs, he found nothing.

“Let’s keep looking. You never know. There may be survivors,” said Polaris, squinting as he searched.

“Maybe we’ll find some further in the valley,” said Azaria.

“There aren’t even any Rexus,” said Gaelan, his voice choked.

Azaria couldn’t imagine that a beast as powerful as the Rexus could be beat.

They explored the valley for what seemed hours. It was the same everywhere – bones, dead trees, watery fields infested with mosquitoes, and stench. No animal life, save for a few birds chirping forlornly, and the odd field mouse.

“We may as well go home, Father.” Azaria said, his voice trembling. “There’s nothing here.”

“I think you’re right,” said Polaris.

As they turned to leave, a movement caught Azaria’s eye. Fearing the Rexus, he raced to catch up to his sire, breaking into beads of sweat. Then his heart leapt, for there taking cautious steps toward them from behind a large boulder was Darius.

“You finally came,” cried the half-grown dinosaur, his voice cracking. “I kept calling for you. Quick! Come and help!” His eyes threatened to spill over with tears. “There’s something wrong with Mother.”

The unicorns followed Darius to a secluded spot in the damaged terrain. There lay Maresa, emaciated and gaunt, her skin rough and scaly, and her eyes glassy. With great difficulty, she raised her head.

“Polaris! Oh, how I hoped that someone would come to help us. It’s been terrible. Such a famine. We’re the only ones left, and I’m afraid I’m too weak to move on,” she said, her voice feeble.

“You must try. Come with us to the unicorns’ valley. Already the sky is lightening and the sun will return, and then there’ll be new trees for you to feed on,” Polaris promised, a false note in his voice.

“No, it’s no use. There won’t be enough plant life anywhere for a long time,” she said. “It’s just too far and I’m near the end, but please … please

take Darius. He's much smaller, and I know he can survive."

Darius's face was streaked with tears. "No, Mother, no! I won't leave without you!" He placed his mouth gently over her neck and tried to pull her up, but Maresa's head was far too heavy. Losing his grip, her face settled on the dirty ground again.

"I can't. I'm too weak. Only one of us can survive, and it won't be me. Please go on, Darius, and save yourself. You were given the gift of sight for a reason. You *must* carry on." She broke into a fitful cough.

Sobbing, Darius struggled to pull her up again and again. Each time she fell back. She tried to cough once more, but her lungs only rattled. Then she settled down and drifted into a deep sleep. Darius, tired too, lay down beside her.

Several hours passed. The dinosaurs dozed on. Maresa's breathing grew labored, and she mumbled from time to time.

"I'm afraid it won't be long now," whispered Polaris. "We'd better stay with her through the night."

"But Father, why don't you just heal her?" Azaria asked.

"I can't. It would take a whole herd of unicorns to heal an animal this size," he said. "Our healing powers are only meant for each other. And besides, we can't cure starvation."

Azaria withdrew, sulking, and then moved close to Gaelan. "She doesn't deserve this," he whispered to his friend, trying to keep his voice steady. "She was so kind and gentle. Why doesn't this sort of thing happen to bad creatures like the lions?"

"A lot of lions didn't survive either," said Polaris. "We've all lost members to the change. All we can do is carry on."

Azaria blinked back tears. He remembered his mother's advice and whispered over and over. "All bad things must end. All bad things must

end," as though somehow her words would make it all go away.

The unicorns stayed by Maresa's side as the evening air grew colder. Where once the night had been rich with sounds, only the ghostly sound of the wind whistling over her labored breathing remained. He shuddered, remembering Orpheus' story the night of the great fireball.

As Maresa took her last breath, Darius awoke and wandered over to her side. He gazed down at her, his eyes filled with tenderness.

"Good-bye, Mother," he said. Then he looked up into the dark sky and spoke, his voice mysterious and songlike. "Can you feel her?" he asked. "Can you feel her spirit leave?"

Azaria shivered, and then exchanged looks with Gaelan.

Darius gazed at the sky for a long time, a slight smile on his lips. Then he turned to the unicorns as though a spell had been broken and said, "While I slept, I had a dream of what the future will bring. My mother was right – I must carry on. I'm ready to go with you now."

The unicorns rose without question and led the young dinosaur home.

Chapter Seven
Close Call

Azaria stared in awe at the sight before him, his chin hanging. Grasses had reclaimed the land, and large, leafy ferns had magically transformed the drab browns to rich greens. The great ponds, whose mosquitoes had tormented him, had long dried up. And where the grey trees had fallen, new saplings shot up, the forest promising to return. It was the sky, though, that captured his attention that morning, making him feel giddy.

“The sun. Can you see it through the haze?” he called, swaying back and forth, his neck stretched toward the heavens.

Gaelan’s brow furrowed. “So it didn’t hit the earth that day. It was something else?”

“I guess not.” Azaria gave a mischievous smile. “But I knew all along it would come back.”

“You did not, you big phony!” Gaelan sideswiped Azaria.

“Yes I did.” Azaria shoved him back.

“Did not,” scoffed Gaelan.

“Okay, so I didn’t.” Azaria lowered his eyes. “But I’m glad it’s back. We need lots of it to grow ferns for Darius.”

“I know. Have you ever seen anyone eat so much in all your life?” Gaelan glanced back at the dinosaur in the distance.

“No. He’s grown to twice his size since he came to live with us.”

“Yeah. My mom says we didn’t know what we were getting ourselves into.”

“That’s for sure, but he’s a lot of fun, though. He’s really changed the valley for the better,” said Azaria.

He looked further to where Darius played with the unicorns. The giant beast picked up Cassi gently in his mouth and placed her on his back. Cassi teetered along his bony spine until Darius lowered his tail, and she slid to the ground, whinnying with glee. In the same way, he lifted Jemmi. Other unicorns scrambled for their turn, giggling as they lined up.

Azaria remembered the day they returned with the much smaller Darius. How the unicorns gaped at the strange creature and darted out of the way when he trundled into the herd – until Polaris, Azaria, and Gaelan appeared.

“This is Darius,” Polaris had announced, “His dam passed away early this morning from starvation. He’ll be part of our herd from now on.”

His words had been met with incredulous stares, but within days, they all warmed up to the giant beast, and he became a popular playmate for the young.

“Hey, Darius, let’s play hide and seek,” called Azaria one day.

“Yeah,” shouted Cassi, “but you’re *it* since you’re too big to hide.”

“Dinosaurs can hide,” said Darius.

“No, they can’t,” said Gaelan, “unless there’s a mountain nearby.”

The young unicorns snickered together, enjoying the joke.

“Don’t be too sure,” Darius began in a low voice. “Sometimes they can sneak up on you ... quite suddenly!” He leapt forward, scattering the foals, and landed with a loud, rumbling thud.

“Yeah, but even so, you’re the only dinosaur around, so it’d be easy to pick you out,” said Cassi, laughing.

“No ... I’m not the only dinosaur,” replied Darius, his eyes glazing.

Azaria’s ears pricked up at his words. He felt his hair rise, but quickly forgot about it as he was caught up in the swiftness of the game.

“Alright then, Azaria’s it,” said Cassi, scurrying away.

“Ah, not again.” Azaria turned his back, counted, and then spun around searching for Darius. He was nowhere to be found.

Azaria wandered around to the usual hiding spots, finding Jemmi behind a dead log, and Cassi hidden behind a large stone. Joining forces, the three searched together for Gaelan, discovering him hidden in the crevasse of a stone escarpment.

“Where’s Darius?” Azaria asked.

“I don’t know,” said Jemmi.

Cassi shook her head. “Me neither.”

“He was here a minute ago,” Gaelan said, looking perplexed.

“Darius,” called Azaria. “Where are you?”

There was no answer.

“Darius?” they all called.

“How can he disappear like that?” said Cassi.

“I don’t know. I hope nothing’s happened to him,” said Jemmi, her tail twitching.

“What could possibly happen to a huge dinosaur?” Gaelan asked.

A loud thud startled them.

“Looking for me?” Darius asked, obviously pleased with himself.

“Where were you?” cried Cassi, her nostrils flared.

“Didn’t I tell you dinosaurs could hide?” Darius chuckled.

“Yeah, but how?” asked Gaelan.

“I’m not telling.” Darius’ grin stretched from ear to ear.

The foals wandered further away, chattering as they went until Gaelan spied something in the distance.

“Oh, look,” he cried. “A cave. Let’s explore it.”

“Well, I don’t know –” began Azaria, remembering Saul’s warning.

“Oh yeah, let’s!” said the fillies, breaking into a trot.

“Hey, where’d Darius go?” asked Azaria, hoping the dinosaur would back him up.

“I don’t know,” said Gaelan, “but are you coming or not?

“You remember what Saul said about the caves,” Azaria said.

“But Saul’s gone. Remember? The fireball? All that stuff?” scoffed Gaelan.

“Well, alright.” Azaria surrendered against his better judgment.

Taking one last look around for the dinosaur, he followed the girls and Gaelan into the cavern, their hooves clattering as they tread on the hard rock. Azaria knew this had probably once been the lair of a Rexus, but he sure wasn’t going to be left behind.

“It’s really dark in here,” said Jemmi, her voice a little unsure.

“Yeah, it’s like night,” agreed Cassi, looking back to the mouth of the cave where daylight still shone.

“Hey, I hear an echo!” Gaelan cried. “Echo ... echo ... echo.”

The fillies joined in too.

“Hoo ... hoo ... hoo,” called Jemmi, throwing her head back like a wolf.

“Hello … hello … hello,” hollered Cassi.

Then Azaria heard it – a long scraping sound, like a very large unicorn dragging his hoof slowly across the floor of the cave.

“Listen, you guys!” he whispered, his hair standing on end. “Did you hear that noise?”

“What noise?” asked Cassi.

It came again, louder this time. Scrape, s-c-r-a-a-a-a-a-p-e.

“That one,” said Azaria, breaking into a cold sweat.

“Stop it, Gaelan!” ordered Jemmi. “You’re scaring me.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Gaelan’s voice rose in pitch.

“Well someone did,” Jemmi whimpered.

“Quiet,” Azaria said.

The yearlings froze. The ominous sound came again, only this time longer and slower ... and much nearer.

Azaria backed away. “Darius, is that you playing a trick on us again?”

The sound moved closer.

“Darius?”

S-c-r-a-a-a-a-a-p-e.

“Let’s get out of here!” Azaria cried. The unicorns bolted from the cave. The scraping sound grew stronger and faster. Leaping into the light, they galloped for several lengths before Azaria dared look back. There, to his horror, a monstrous grey Rexus stumbled toward them, growling fiercely.

“We’ve got to get back to the herd,” Azaria shouted, “but they’re so far away! Quick!”

They galloped as fast as their hooves could carry them, sweat pouring off their sides, their breath heaving. Azaria measured the distance to the herd with his eyes. They were still too far. He glanced over his shoulder again to gauge how close the Rexus was.

“Wait,” he said, slowing to a canter. “There’s something wrong with this Rexus.”

The others slowed too, eyeing the Rexus with curiosity.

Bones protruding through its skin like skeletal branches of a dying tree, the Rexus hobbled toward them. It eyed the unicorns, drool slithering from its mouth. Singling out Jemmi, it staggered toward her. Jemmi screamed. The Rexus snapped its huge jaws, and the young filly ducked to the side. It tore at her with its razor-sharp claws, but she leapt away as it lurched forward.

The herd came thundering from afar, shouting threats at the Rexus, Darius close behind.

“They’re still too far. They’ll never get here in time,” whimpered Gaelan. “We’ve got to help her.”

Azaria stared back at the scaly monster, paralyzed. He opened his mouth to scream when something burst from behind him. It was Darius!

“How did you get here so quickly?” he asked.

Darius ignored him and faced the Rexus.

Cassi let out a shrill whinny. “Now he’s going for Darius!” She closed her eyes.

“Oh no you don’t, you old bunch of bones,” yelled Polaris, closing the distance between them. He lunged at the Rexus and tore through the great beast’s heart with his horn, ripping the shriveled skin as though it were mere lichen. The Rexus stared down to see its scarlet blood oozing from the wound. It spun around, gazed up at the sky, and then toppled to the ground dead.

The unicorns trembled in the aftermath of the attack, their breath heavy, their faces etched in fear. Tears rolled down Jemmi’s white cheeks.

“Haven’t we suffered enough without this?” she sobbed. “So much has happened. And now this. What if there are more Rexus?”

Jemmi’s dam moved closer to soothe her, but it was Darius’ words that calmed her.

“There aren’t. I’m the last of the dinosaurs,” he said, his voice gentle.

Azaria was stunned to see how composed Darius was after what had just transpired. “You weren’t the slightest bit afraid, were you?” he asked, his head cocked to one side.

“No,” said Darius.

“But why not?” asked Gaelan. “You could have been killed.”

“Because I knew it wasn’t my time,” said Darius.

“What do you mean?” asked Azaria.

“I haven’t fulfilled my life’s task yet. I’m going to live to be very old.”

“But you’re the last of the dinosaurs. Doesn’t that make you sad?” asked Jemmi, her tears beginning to dry.

“No, because I have all of you.”

The herd was quiet for a moment. Then one of the mares spoke. “And we’re glad we have you too.”

Blinking back tears, the unicorns moved forward and laid their horns affectionately on Darius’ sides.

Azaria stood back from the group, feeling glum.

He heard Cassi say, “Hey, how come Polaris can kill with his horn? I thought horns healed?”

“Because he was angry,” said a mare.

“So when you’re angry your horn can kill?”

“Yes, it’s very powerful.”

Azaria watched them saunter away, their words drifting off in the distance. His heart was heavy. He had noticed the leaves on the trees growing thinner and thinner, and that there were fewer ferns.

Certainly not enough to feed a long-necked dinosaur.

Bowing his head, he vowed to keep what he knew to himself – that Darius would soon have to move on to find food.

Chapter Eight
New Arrival

Azaria stood in the cool river, the chilly water tickling his lips while Gaelan, Nathaniel, and Zackary splashed about nearby.

There had been talk of the other unicorns joining Polaris' herd. The leaders had said they'd be safer in greater numbers. Zackary and Nathaniel, his two cousins, had been with them for days, and Azaria hoped they would stay as each moment had been packed with adventure.

Dipping his head in the river to drink, he flinched when something sharp struck his nose. His curiosity piqued, he watched as a strange object swept past him and floated into a small backwash.

"What was that?" he asked, turning to his friends.

"I don't know," said Gaelan, moving forward and cocking his head to one side. "It looks like it's made of trees."

"Yeah, but I've never seen anything so straight coming from a tree," said Azaria, wrinkling his brow.

"It's weird," Nathaniel said, following close behind Gaelan.

Catching site of Polaris, Azaria called out, "Father, look. What *is* this?"

Polaris inspected it and poked at it with his hoof. The thing dipped down in the water and bounced back up. He pushed it with his nose only to have it drift away.

"I really don't know!"

Feeling a sudden rumbling of the ground, Azaria turned to find Darius. "So you know what this is?" he asked.

Darius lowered his head, his eyes widening in terror. He backed up two steps, breathing in large gasps. “A box!” he whispered. Twisting around his massive body, he broke into a run.

Azaria followed. “Darius, what’s wrong?”

“They’re coming!” Darius said, rivers of sweat pouring from him.

“Who?”

“The creatures-that-walk-on-two-legs!” the dinosaur called back, his voice trembling as his powerful legs shook the earth.

“But you said all the dinosaurs were gone. The Rexus are dead. They can’t bother us anymore.”

“These creatures are far more dangerous than the Rexus, especially the Ishmael. You have no idea. I’ve got to hide!”

Azaria watched his friend flee, then swung his head and glanced at the herd. When he turned back, the dinosaur had vanished.

“Darius, where did you go?” he called.

All he heard was the forlorn whistle of the wind.

A few days later, they came. Azaria and Gaelan’s ears flicked nervously as they watched the large floating boxes they traveled on, land near the shore.

“The creatures-that-walk-on-two-legs are pretty strange,” said Gaelan. “Kind of small too.”

“And they’re hairy, but they don’t have pelts like the other animals. And did you notice the males have manes like lions but not the women?” asked Azaria.

“Yeah, they kind of look like monkeys!” Gaelan broke into a chuckle.

“Only bigger. And what’s that covering their bodies?” Azaria said, eyeing the false skins they wore.

“I don’t know.”

Azaria watched as one of the creatures raised an arm and pointed to the giant floating boxes, roaring like a Rexus, his black hair thrown back. The others scrambled to unload them.

“Hear the garbling noise they make? It sounds like it has patterns. Do you think they actually have a language?” asked Gaelan.

“I guess so.”

They watched from afar while the beings unpacked their belongings, taking them out of yet other boxes. The angry one with the dark hair, seemed to be in charge, growling and waving his arms about in a frantic manner.

Within a few days, they were constructing long, hard box-like objects from the sand that they piled one on top of another. One full moon later, a small group of straight cave-like dwellings had sprung up on the banks of the river.

“I didn’t know you could make things like that with trees and sand,” said Azaria.

“Me neither. But how do they do it?” Gaelan’s brow creased.

“It seems they have hands that can hold things.” Azaria stared down at his own hooves like he had never seen them before.

“Just like monkeys,” Gaelan repeated his joke-grown-stale as though it was the funniest thing in the world. He laughed himself silly until Azaria gave him a stern look.

“Think maybe Darius is wrong?” asked Azaria.

“I don’t know. They look pretty harmless. To tell you the truth, I don’t think they’re even interested in us.”

“Probably because they have those other animals – those things that Mohala calls big-hooves,” said Azaria.

The unicorn-like creatures that accompanied the humans fascinated Azaria. They were larger than the unicorns, but came in several different colors and had the biggest hooves he'd ever seen. He wondered if that was what gave them their great strength when they pulled heavy loads. But stranger yet, was that they actually obeyed the creatures-that-walk-on-two-legs! When the creatures ordered them to move, they did. When they insisted the big-hooves stop, they did that too. Azaria simply couldn't understand why these beasts lived and worked when they could be free like the unicorns.

Then one day, the angry one sat down in the long grass and watched the unicorns, entranced. He stayed there for the entire day, only to return the next day, and the next day after that.

"He's too close." Azaria let out a nervous rumble.

"But he's not doing anything," said Gaelan. "A lion attacks quickly after seeing its prey."

"Yeah, but these aren't lions." Azaria scraped his front hoof nervously.

"But look at them. They don't move fast and they don't have sharp claws or teeth."

"If Darius said they were dangerous, I believe him," insisted Azaria, loyalty burning fierce in his heart.

"I guess time will tell."

Several weeks later, it almost seemed as though it *had* when Polaris addressed the herds.

"Some of you have been concerned about the creatures-that-walk-on-two-legs and wondering what we should do. I've been watching them now for quite some time. They haven't made any advances on us. So I think we can all relax and live in harmony with them as we have for generations with other animals."

“But what about Darius’ words?” called Azaria. “He told me they were worse than the Rexus.”

“Yes,” agreed Aurora. “And he’s been right about everything else.”

“But he fled before even seeing them,” Polaris said. “He could be mistaken. It could be another creature that hasn’t arrived yet – a much larger one that walks upright. But honestly, I don’t think this is it.”

The other mares mumbled in protest.

Polaris continued. “But just so you’ll all feel comfortable, I’ve decided that our herds will stay close together in case Darius’ words turn out to be true. Even though we’ll be three herds, it’ll be as though we’re one. That way, we can protect one another.”

Nathaniel, Zackary, and Gaelan exchanged excited glances.

Azaria felt uneasy as his father dismissed the group. He had always followed Polaris’ words blindly. Could it be that this time his father was wrong?

Chapter Nine
Ishmael

“They’re lovely.” Ishmael raked his fingers through his dark beard as he sat, mesmerized by the beauty of the unicorns. “This could be just what I’ve been waiting for all along.”

The fireball’s terrifying arrival had deeply affected Ishmael. His town had lost many people to the devastation. Hundreds had died of starvation and others of the diseases that snuck in like a thief to rob the folk of their loved ones. Ishmael’s home like many others’ had been swept away like firewood by the great hurricanes, leaving his family destitute. What was far worse than the desolation was what it had done to change the townsfolk. Ishmael had seen honest people marauding, stealing, and beating others for food. Tempers flared and people attacked neighbours for a mere morsel. At first, Ishmael had been horrified, but then decided that he, like the others, had to survive no matter what the cost, and so he hardened his heart. After all, this was the way of the new world.

He had gathered up the survivors and argued with them that there was no other choice but to leave and start again elsewhere. At first the townsfolk resisted, but his silver tongue soon convinced them. They built rather modest boats, packed up their meager belongings, and grudgingly set forth to find the new site for their village, one where they could again prosper.

It had been hard. The boats were not solid and the humans not sailors. Several of the vessels were lost including two of Ishmael’s. The townsfolk had floated down the river for weeks. When they finally arrived in the unicorns’ valley, that gloriously warm day, it seemed like a paradise. The sun shone brightly, the storms had abated, and all was lush and green.

“This is where we’ll start over again,” Ishmael declared to the survivors, acting as their self-appointed leader. He stole a glance at his wife, Adiva. She picked up their child and walked away, her lips pressed together in a tight line.

Ishmael gazed greedily at the unicorns. Wanting wealth and respect, he had never been content to simply grow his crops and survive off the land. He was no farmer. He’d been a merchant before the fireball, selling goods until there were none to be had. Before leaving, he had gathered up several horses left to fend for themselves, the owners being too unwell to take notice of their livestock. Transporting these large beasts on the small barges to the new valley proved to be no small feat, but he managed to carry about a dozen to safety.

Gazing at his small herd, he shook his head with impatience. “It’ll take years to breed these horses,” he said aloud to himself. “I want riches now. I want everyone in the streets to admire me when I walk by.”

Ishmael turned his attention back to the graceful unicorns that grazed before him. At first their beauty had mystified him. He had sat and watched them gallop through the valley, their shimmering manes and tails flowing in the wind; their spiral horns ornamenting their heads like jewels. How majestic they were. How extraordinary! What great beasts of battle they could be if trained to use their horns as weapons against their enemies’ horses. He could become a general, leading his unicorns in attack against some future foe all the way to victory. The town would hail him a great hero, and he would be the envy of all.

As the sun lowered in the sky, Ishmael rose to his feet. It was decided – he must have one.

“Utterly beautiful ... and very valuable indeed!” he said, his bulbous nose wrinkling up into a greedy sneer.

Chapter Ten
The Capture

The thundering sound of hooves and the strong smell of sweat roused Azaria.

“Polaris, wake up!” neighed Nathaniel, bathed in foam, his sides heaving as he galloped into the herd.

Azaria shivered at the crispness of the air. Dawn was just creeping in.

“What is it?” Polaris grumbled.

“He captured them!” Nathaniel brayed. “He captured all of them!”

“Who?” Azaria heard his father demand.

“The creature-that-walks-on-two-legs. The angry one who kept watching us. He surprised us before dawn. He had several others with him – they came out of nowhere! I’m the only one who escaped.” Nathaniel wheezed.

“What did he do to the unicorns?” Azaria asked.

“He chased everyone into some ... thing. It’s like trees tied together. Once you’re in, you can’t get out,” he said between gasps.

“Show me where!” Polaris roared.

Nathaniel reared, ready to charge, and then stopped, his hooves in mid-air. “But, Polaris,” he said, “I haven’t told you the rest.”

“What?”

“The other humans ... they call him … Ishmael.”

The Great Stallion’s eyes grew twice their size.

“Darius was right,” Azaria whispered to Gaelan who had crept up beside him as the herd awakened. “I knew we couldn’t trust the creatures-that-walks-on-two-legs.”

Polaris eyed Nathaniel gravely, and then stared at the blinking mares, calculating. “Then we’d better wait until we’ve studied the situation. Stay with us, Nathaniel, and be one of us. In the meantime, we’ll come up with a plan to help Solomon. Azaria and Gaelan, you’ll be the messengers between our herds. As for the rest of you, stay far away from the creatures-that-walk-on-two-legs. Do *not* let them come anywhere near you. Understood?”

The unicorns whinnied in agreement, their voices rumbling with apprehension until the sun rose, softening the nightmarish feelings of the capture. Then they began planning.

That night, Polaris, Azaria, and Gaelan snuck on quiet hooves to where the tied trees held their friends captive.

“How strange,” said Azaria, eyeing the structure. “It really is made out of trees.”

“Stay back!” ordered Polaris. “It’s still daylight inside the angry one’s false cave. We’ll wait until he’s asleep.”

Azaria was very curious about the strange light that the creatures-that-walk-on-two-legs created inside their dwellings. Stretching his neck out, he studied the tiny fires that burned on small sticks with fascination.

Why don’t they burn quickly like wood does?

They waited until the moon traveled higher in the sky before Ishmael finally blew out the flame. Then they crept out of hiding.

Circling the structure, they examined it from every side to see if there were some way out. The captured unicorns nickered their story in low voices as they rounded the pen.

“Thank goodness you’re here,” cried Nathaniel’s dam, Dorianna. “We’ve tried everything, and we can’t get out.”

“But if there’s no way out, then how did he get you in?” asked Azaria.

“There’s a section over there that opens up,” said Solomon pointing his horn to the part that stood near Ishmael’s dwelling. “They tied it shut after they herded us in.”

Azaria eyed the mysterious spot, tilting his head to one side.

“I think the solution would be to get Ishmael to untie it for us,” said Polaris. “Does he ever open it?”

“Not so far,” said Solomon.

“Then keep watching,” Polaris instructed. “See what you can learn. We’ll be back tomorrow, so you can tell us what you’ve found then.”

Azaria, Polaris, and Gaelan bid the captured herd farewell and slipped back into the dark of night.

The next day, they took cover close by in the forest and waited. They were soon rewarded when Ishmael strolled outdoors, whistling. He stood outside the pen, watching the unicorns with the same mesmerized look Azaria had seen before. After a time, he pulled out a long cord and climbed over the tied trees.

“A snake!” hissed Gaelan, shuffling his hooves and snorting.

“No wait. It’s not. It doesn’t have a head and it doesn’t move,” said Azaria.

“A dead snake?” Gaelan tried again.

“Gaelan!” Azaria frowned.

Azaria watched as Ishmael took the cord, tied the end to make a loop, and then swung it about. It fell neatly over Zackary’s neck and tightened. Zackary balked, and let out a shrill neigh. But Ishmael held his ground, wrapping the other end of the cord around one of the trees. Then he ran to fetch another cord that had been knotted in certain spots just right to fit the head of a unicorn. Taking slow, casual steps, he reached up, and with one

swift motion, attempted to slip it over Zackary's muzzle. Zackary rumbled and sidestepped out of the way, giving his head a fierce shake.

"You'll wear this halter if it kills me," Ishmael snarled.

Zackary reared up and pulled back. Ishmael yanked the cord forward. They fought, unicorn against creature. Ishmael persisted and, after many tries, managed to slip the halter in place. Trembling with fury, Zackary lunged forward and dug his teeth into the flesh of Ishmael's arm. The bite drew blood. Ishmael screamed, enraged.

Taking fast, hard steps, he retrieved a willow branch – long and thin at the end.

"You will do as I say or I'll whip you," Ishmael shouted, his voice hoarse with pain.

Zackary's hooves drummed the ground as again he backed away.

Raising the whip, Ishmael lashed out, cutting deep into Zackary's flank. His nostrils flared, Zackary bolted, zigzagging while Ishmael tried to steer him into a circle. The whip fell again. Zackary reared in protest. His eyes crazed, he broke into a gallop and dragged Ishmael behind him, the cord sliding through his enemy's hands.

Ishmael let go, pulled himself up and cursed at the angry, red burn marks in his palms. But Zackary wasn't done yet. Circling back, he reared and pummeled Ishmael's chest, knocking him onto his backside before galloping to the far corner of the structure.

"You stupid animal!" shouted Ishmael. "You're so dumb, no one can train you!" He hurled the whip to the ground and stomped away.

Azaria giggled, his eyes watering. Gaelan joined him, and soon all three unicorns guffawed, tears streaming down their cheeks.

"That was so funny!" Azaria howled.

“I know. Zackary just wouldn’t do what he wanted.” Gaelan could barely force out the words between gasps.

Azaria’s laughter slowed as a solution took shape in his mind. “But that’s it,” he said. “That’s the answer!”

“What?” asked Polaris.

“Come. I’ll explain it as we head home,” said Azaria.

That night, Azaria, Polaris, and Gaelan crept back to the captured herd.

Solomon trotted to meet them, followed by the mares. “You missed what happened to Zackary!” He shook his mane in disgust.

“We saw it all,” said Azaria, breaking into fresh chuckles.

“Boy, was Ishmael mad when Zackary wouldn’t obey.” Gaelan chortled.

“Yes, well Zackary wasn’t always the sharpest horn in the herd. I think he just didn’t get it,” said Solomon.

“Hey!” protested Zackary, scowling.

“But don’t you see?” said Azaria. “That’s the solution. If everyone were to behave in the same way, Ishmael would soon give up and set you free again. He would have no use for you.”

Solomon thought a moment, his eyes flickering with hope. “I think you may be right,” he said.

“But the whippings, Polaris, we’re afraid of them,” whimpered Dorianna.

“Yes, but it only hurts for a moment,” said Zackary. “It’s not so bad when you know that it’ll be healed instantly once Ishmael’s back is turned.”

“That’s true,” she said.

“I admire your valour, Zackary,” said Polaris. “We should all be like you.” He turned to the herd. “I suspect what Ishmael wants is to turn us all

into big-hooves. He’s hoping we’ll obey him just like they do and carry creatures-that-walk-on-two-legs on our backs. And we’re not big-hooves, are we?”

“No!” called a stallion. “Ishmael is such a moron!”

The unicorns broke into a fit of giggling. It spread like wildfire through the herd. The laughter grew louder and louder until the door of the dwelling flew open, silencing them. Ishmael scowled as he spied the unicorns huddled together in a corner of the pen. As the three free unicorns turned and fled, Azaria caught sight of an open-mouthed, wide-eyed Ishmael.

Chapter Eleven
The Boat

Ishmael fumed, slammed the door, and stomped into the brick house.

“They’re brainless! I’ve tried nearly all of them and not a one is trainable. They’re like zebras. Stupid, stupid, stupid!”

“You still have the horses,” Adiva said, her voice cold as ice as she chopped roots for their supper.

“Bah, horses. They have no horn. And they’re ugly compared to unicorns. Plus, they’re as common as rodents. Now on the other hand, if I could train the unicorns,” he said as though speaking to himself, “I could be the richest merchant in town.”

Adiva hammered the knife onto the wooden cutting board, keeping her back to her husband, her long, dark hair trailing down.

“And what’s with their hide? It heals the minute I’m not looking.” He threw up his arms, a huff escaping him. “If I could find some way to make them feel more pain, then maybe I could control them.”

Laying the roots aside, Adiva grabbed some cumin, threw it into the mortar, and ground it hard with the pestle. The scraping sound grated on Ishmael’s nerves.

She cleared her throat. “Perhaps you should try being a little gentler. They’re peaceful animals,” she said, her icy voice digging in like a knife. She ground the cumin even harder, the abrasive noise growing louder.

Ishmael turned and glared. “What do you know about training animals? You’ve never even been on a horse. If I can’t tame them, no one can. I should just turn the lot of them out. They cost too much to feed anyway!”

Ishmael threw down his coat and stormed out of the room past his small daughter, Ali, who cowered behind a chair, her brown eyes peering up at him. He had seen how the people snickered when he strolled past in town. In just a short while, he had become the laughing stock all because of those blasted unicorns. What could he do to regain the admiration of the people? He muddled it over in his brain for a while, and then swung open the door and returned to his wife.

“You know more people are settling in the town. If I could find someone dumb enough, maybe I could pawn the unicorns off on them. Then everyone would look up to me for making such a smart sale.” He laughed with scorn, wrinkling his nose.

“Or you could just be decent and let them go,” Adiva said, lifting Ali to wash the child’s face.

“Ah, what do you know?” He swept a hand, dismissing her words.

Ishmael’s chance came a few days later when a boatload of people arrived in their small town. He waited as the vessel coasted slowly toward the quay, moving rhythmically with the waves that sloshed against the banks. It thudded against the dock with a dull sound. An odd, unpleasant smell he couldn’t quite place drifted from the vessel. Craning his neck to see, he waited for the seaman to jump out and tie the boat to the deck, but the man never showed.

“What the ...” he said, reaching out to grab the rope and forming the knot himself.

He hoisted himself up on the wooden vessel, wearing his most polished smile, and peered in. It was dark inside, and it took a minute for his eyes to adjust. Piles of what looked like clothes lay disheveled on the floor of the boat.

Something’s wrong.

Moving closer, he jumped when one of the piles moved.

“Please help me,” whispered a man, his voice little more than a rasp.

Ishmael’s eyes fell on the black blotches of the man’s arms. Stumbling backward, he landed on the deck, his eyes wide with horror.

“It’s the plague!” he shrieked. “It’s the plague! They’re all sick!”

The townsfolk dropped everything and rushed to the dock, their voices raised in fear.

“Get rid of them now before it spreads,” screamed a woman.

“Quick before we all catch it,” shouted a shopkeeper.

The mob crowded the boat. A young farmer with bulging muscles began shoving it away from the dock while Ishmael struggled to untie it. Soon, several people joined him in pushing. The boat gave no resistance. It merely drifted away on the river, the waves lapping away in rhythm on its hull. The townspeople grew calmer as it moved from their sight.

Ishmael let out a sigh of relief and turned toward home. As he left, he nearly tripped over two wet rats who scurried across his path. “Filthy vermin!” he cursed.

Shaken by the ordeal, he scrubbed his hands and arms thoroughly with the soap Adiva made from fat and lye when he arrived home. His head ached from all the excitement.

“What’s wrong?” asked Adiva, her brows furrowed.

“A boat came in full of dying people,” he said, shaking his head with disgust. “They smelled awful and had black blotches all over their skin. I just can’t get the smell out of my nose.”

“The plague?” Adiva reeled, her eyes huge. “Did you touch them?”

“No, of course not. We just pushed them back into the river.”

“You mean you didn’t help them at all?” cried Adiva, her face a mask of shock. “You could have at least given them water.”

“No. There was nothing I could do. We’d all catch it anyway.” He shivered at the idea.

Ishmael retired to his room to rest for a while. As he lay there, his thoughts turned back to his herd of unicorns. He wondered if he could sell them as pets, but discarded the idea. Perhaps as meat? Shaking his head, he remembered the stomach sickness that struck after the fireball hit. The survivors had turned to other animals for food with undesirable results, their stomachs seizing with cramps for weeks afterward. He doubted anyone would sink their teeth into a new meat for a long time.

Two weeks later, Ali’s whimpering woke Ishmael and Adiva in the night.

“Can’t anyone get some sleep around here?” he grumbled.

Adiva rushed to the little girl and picked her up. “She’s burning up!” she cried. Groping around in the dark for her cloak, she slipped it on. “I’m going to get some water to cool her fever.”

A few hours later, Adiva awoke Ishmael, distraught, her eyes dark from lack of sleep.

“Ishmael, she’s throwing up,” she cried. “Get the healer!”

Ishmael sat up and stared in horror at his tiny three-year-old daughter. Could it be the plague? Fear seized his soul. Leaping up, he said, “No. She’ll be okay. Just keep cooling her down.” Then he slipped out.

He stayed away from the house until late that night. When he finally crept in, he shut the door with a soft thud and slept near the hearth, away from Ali.

The next morning, Adiva burst into the room, awakening him with a jolt, her face stained with tears.

“Look at her arm and legs!” She sobbed.

His eyes rounded with horror at the child's limbs. Bruises covered the little girl's body. It had to be the plague! Backing away, he nearly knocked over an urn, and then sidled to the door.

"I … I have to tend to the unicorns," he said, his forehead beaded with sweat. Throwing the door open, he ran to the corral, his wife in pursuit.

"It's the same thing those people had on the boat! You have to do something, Ishmael. Please help her!" she cried. "Go for the healer!"

"No," he shouted, his voice shaking as he climbed over the fence. "The healer won't be able to do anything for her."

"Ishmael" cried Adiva, still pursuing him, the limp girl in her arms. "She's our child."

Ishmael stumbled away, escaping the unpleasant sound of his wife's wailings. His heart raced.

I can't get too close. I might catch it.

The dull thud of hooves made him turn. Ishmael watched with fascination as one of the unicorn mares sauntered to Ali and touched the child's face with her lips.

"What on ..." he began.

She lowered her ivory horn across the dying child's heart and held it there.

Adiva flinched and attempted to pulled the girl away.

Then Ali let out a giggle and sat up, reaching her hand to the mare's face. "It's so soft, Mama," she said.

"Ishmael!" Adiva's voice rose in pitch as she turned and stared at her husband with astonishment. "Her bruises are disappearing!" She placed her fingers on Ali's forehead. "And the fever's breaking." She peeled off the child's clothes, examining the fading splotches, and then gazed at Dorianna as though a great revelation had come to her. "It was the mare!"

Ishmael stood, his chin hanging, the whites of his eyes showing. Then his expression slowly changed to a sly smirk.

“So, the unicorns have healing powers,” he said, grinning from ear to ear. “And that’s why when I whip them they get better so fast. They’ve been outsmarting me all along. I haven’t been wasting my time with these creatures after all. I’m going to be rich!”

He leapt up, flailing his arms about, his eyes mad with glee, but stopped when he noted the shock in his wife’s eyes. Reaching over, he gave Ali a brief pat on the head, then turned, his fast steps taking him toward the town.

Chapter Twelve
The Plague

The cries began in the settlement, first in one dwelling, then spreading to the next, each day worsening. Azaria had once heard a female make this sad noise, her face buried in her hands, but hadn't understood what it meant. Now he knew as he watched a male carry out a wrapped bundle and lay it before the entrance. His mate joined him, and together they wailed, their tears raining on the covering. Soon, more bundles were left in the streets.

"The creatures-that-walk-on-two-legs are dying!" said Azaria, his voice low.

"I know," Gaelan said, twitching his hide nervously.

"It's worse than when the storms took away so many of our herds," Azaria said. "I feel sorry for them."

Gaelan shook his head. "But like Polaris says, it's part of nature, like when the rabbits die out every seven years." He pondered the drama before him for a while when his face lit up. "You know, maybe that's how we'll free the herd," he said as though he had just had the best idea ever.

"How?" asked Azaria.

"Well, Ishmael won't let them go now that he's figured out unicorns can heal. But if enough creatures-that-walk-on-two-legs die, then he won't need us anymore." Gaelan let out a stale laugh.

"It's not the other creatures who did this, Gaelan. It's Ishmael. And besides, we'd still have to figure out how to open the tied trees." Azaria gave a sad smile.

“True,” said Gaelan, letting out a long sigh. He frowned, and then added, “But I can’t forgive him for what he did to Dorianna.”

For days, they had watched Ishmael work with Zackary’s dam. He had separated her completely from the herd, and then whipped her into submission until she allowed him to lead her around by a halter. He never let her return to the others. Her back had remained streaked with blood, and her eyes were crazed with pain.

The next day, Azaria and Gaelan watched Ishmael bring Dorianna to the settlement. He took the mare inside one of the false caves and, a brief time later, guided her back out again. Cries of joy echoed from within the walls of the dwelling as Ishmael arose from the dark abode smiling gleefully, his hand clutching a small but dirty bag of gold.

Azaria’s heart pounded. “He’s using Dorianna to heal the sick, he said, “but she won’t survive!”

“She only healed one of the creatures, Azaria,” said Gaelan, his voice calm.

“Yeah, but remember Darius’ dam? Father couldn’t heal her because she was too large. The same thing will happen here. She’ll heal so many creatures that she won’t make it. We’ve got to do something! Let’s find Father!”

Azaria whipped around and broke into a gallop. They searched, but never found him. When they returned, all they could do was watch, their hearts sick while Ishmael led Dorianna from dwelling to dwelling, each time with the same results, the cries of joy and the filthy sack growing fuller and fuller.

“Look, Gaelan, her horn has changed colour. It’s grayish,” cried Azaria as the sun approached the horizon.

Dorianna had slowed her pace. She staggered and then stumbled. Catching herself, she pushed forward, her eyes dull and listless. Taking a few more steps, she shuddered, and then fell. Ishmael grabbed her cord and pulled with all his might to force her up. The mare trembled, but couldn't rise. He shouted, and then pulled out the dreaded whip. She let out a hoarse neigh, her eyes wild with fear, struggled to her feet and traveled a few more steps, only to collapse again. Ishmael raised the whip, striking his mark, but this time she didn't move. He kicked her, but it was too late.

"She's dead," cried Gaelan.

"Oh, my gosh!" shouted Azaria. "We've got to warn the others!"

The young unicorns galloped, their hooves thundering, to where they finally found Polaris and the herd. Azaria recounted the story, his voice shaking. The herd listened, stunned, and then broke into loud neighs and whinnies of grief.

"We must do something," cried a mare. "Otherwise, all the unicorns will die, and we'll cease to exist."

Azaria watched Polaris. The stallion's tail and ears twitched. He'd never seen the noble stallion look so unsure or frightened in all his life. The great leader stared at the settlement, helpless, defenseless. Azaria thought he saw the glint of tears in his eyes as he turned away.

"Darius was right," Polaris said, facing the herd. "Ishmael is far worse than the Rexus. I was so wrong. We're all in grave danger."

Chapter Thirteen
The Powder

Ishmael basked in the glory of a hero. He had single-handedly been responsible for the destruction of the plague. The frail townspeople held a ceremony for him and built a monument in his name. Women threw flowers at his feet, and the men honoured him with flasks of their finest wines. Ishmael strutted about for weeks until the townsfolk grew weary of his gloating, and he became just another man.

“I don’t get it. I save the whole town from the plague and everyone’s already forgotten about it?”

He paced back and forth, fuming, before turning his attention to the sacks of gold sitting on his table.

“Hmmm! Nine bags for nine unicorns,” he said aloud, placing a finger on his lip. “Let’s see. It’ll cost five bags to pay for the new house. That leaves four.” He dreamed of the envious looks the townsfolk would give when they saw his new home, but he wasn’t satisfied. Ishmael wanted more. He approached Adiva.

“The men will begin the work on the house tomorrow,” he said, breaking the icy silence of the room.

“So be it,” she said, her voice void of emotion as she uncovered the rising bread dough.

Ishmael’s muscles tensed at the coldness of his wife. “So what’s wrong now? I thought you’d be happy being so rich.”

“I would think a daughter, a wife, and food on the table would be enough riches for anyone.” She turned and pointed an accusing finger at him. “And why did you have to kill the mare that saved Ali? That was

unforgivable!” She thrust her fist hard into the dough, turned it over, and punched it several more times.

Ishmael’s face reddened at the memory of his behaviour during Ali’s illness, but it wasn’t his fault. There was a plague going on. Anyone would have done the same.

“It’s just an animal,” he growled, his voice filled with sarcasm.

“No she wasn’t. She saved your little girl’s life. And for that, you should be eternally grateful.”

Ishmael’s shame burned deep. He bowed his head for a bit, then shook it hard and changed the subject. “That’s all in the past. Now let’s think about the future.” He rubbed his hands with greed. “I think I know of a way to make more gold,” he said.

Adiva didn’t answer – just kept pounding – but he persisted anyway.

“There are nine horns. I could grind them up into a healing powder. Then I could go upriver and sell it for a fortune.”

His eyebrows rose at the thought of his fame in another town. His chest puffed out as he imagined the scene: more monuments, more flowers and wine, and best of all, more gold.

“And how do you know the healing powder would even work?” she asked, the tension in her voice as sharp as a knife. “Those nine unicorns died because they couldn’t handle that much disease. I doubt there’s any magic left in those horns.”

“There’s always the others,” he said, twiddling his fingers together in anticipation. “I could take *them* upriver.”

“But you can’t transport them. Remember how hard it was to get the horses here? These animals are far more intelligent. They’d escape.”

“All the more reason to try the powder.” He flashed a wicked grin and left the house before she could argue.

He set out to where Dorianna's skeleton lay along the path, but when he got there, he found two small bouquets of laurel laid by her bones. Puzzled, he picked up the bundles, stared at them, and then threw them aside. He sawed off the mare's horn from her skull and wrapped it in a soiled cloth. Returning home, he ground it to a fine powder. The horn smelled, so he threw in lavender for good measure. Next, he added some sweet clover to lessen the bitter taste. After a few hours, he thought he had a finished product.

The next day, he marched into town, his head held high. He walked past the monument where the flowers had shriveled and dried, where the streets now lay quiet. A few men raised their hands in acknowledgement, their faces void of any camaraderie as he passed them. Ishmael smoldered inside. No respect – he'd show them.

Strutting as though he didn't care he, he found his way to his old neighbour, Zeb. He knocked, but there was no answer. Pushing his ear close to the door, he heard a weak call from within.

"Can't an old man get any rest around here?"

"Zeb, it's me, Ishmael," he said, his voice as sweet as strawberries.

"Away with you! I'm in rough shape today. My joints are just killin' me, and it hurts so bad that I can't even cover myself with my blanket. Not only am I in pain but I'm freezin' too. I should'a let the plague get me," Zeb complained, breaking into the rattling cough of an old man.

Ishmael ignored Zeb's rudeness and shoved the door open. "Well, I have just the thing for you then."

"What? You got a unicorn hidden in that bag somewhere? I thought you killed them all off."

"No, my man," said Ishmael hiding his annoyance at the accusation.

“Well, that’s what *I* heard,” said Zeb, coughing again, this time much deeper.

“I have a few left, but I’ve got something better.” He pasted on a phony smile.

“What?” Zeb croaked.

“Healing powder, made from the horn of a real, genuine unicorn. Guaranteed to cure you of all your ills.” Ishmael recited his well-practiced sales pitch.

“Healing powder, you say?” The old man looked a little interested. “But will it work?”

“Try it and see,” said Ishmael, hiding his excitement. He removed one of the sacks, took a pinch of the powder and dropped it onto the old man’s shriveled tongue.

“Aaaaaccckkk! That’s the worse stuff I ever tasted. What’d you put in there – horse dung?”

Zeb gagged and retched several times, but managed to swallow the foul mixture. When the gagging had passed, he lay back. A few moments later, his sour old face cracked like dried earth into a smile, and he sat up.

“You know, I think it actually worked. The pain’s gone.” He rose to his feet. “I feel new. This is amazing!” Walking about like a spry young man, his eyes glowing, he asked, “How much do you want?”

Ishmael lured his prey in. “Two pieces of gold for this sack full.”

Zeb’s eyes widened, and his eyebrows slowly locked together. “That’s a lot!”

“Well, that’s my fee. Take it or leave it,” said Ishmael, the corners of his mouth turned up in a sly grin.

“Ishmael, you know what I’ve always thought of you and your business dealings,” reproached the old man.

“Take it or leave it.” Ishmael’s voice was firm.

Zeb dropped a hard fist on the table. “Alright, then!”

Ishmael left the house, a broad, triumphant smile on his lips. He spent the rest of that afternoon harvesting the remaining horns. Again, he was puzzled when he noticed each skeleton had two small bouquets laid carefully beside them.

“Who’s doing this?” he muttered to himself. “They’re just animals.” He kicked the bouquets aside, scattering leaves everywhere. “The fools.”

Chapter Fourteen
The Commemoration

“Let us commemorate those who died,” said Mohala, her voice solemn and heavy with emotion.

Azaria listened as Polaris spoke first the names of those deceased, telling stories of each one, praising them, and shedding tears. Other unicorns spoke too, sharing funny anecdotes of their fallen friends. But after the laughter died, the humour merely made them lament all the more.

His head held low, Azaria remembered the last great meeting when they had all played and enjoyed each other’s company. How things had changed. Gone was the freedom and simplicity of the life they once reveled in. Sure, things had improved since the fireball, but the one thing they couldn’t fix was the presence of the creatures-that-walk-on-two-legs. They’d never leave, and they’d keep depleting the herds. Azaria sighed. How much more could they take?

Orpheus, the storyteller rose and asked to speak. Everyone grew silent as they did whenever he spun one of his yarns.

“My friends,” he said, taking a deep breath, “I have a message for all of you – from the dead.”

Azaria’s mouth dropped.

“From the ghost of Dorianna.”

A few of the mares drew in sharp breaths while the others mumbled all at once.

“Oh stop your nonsense, you old big-hoof,” scoffed one of the males. “Your stories are nothing but a lot of hot air.”

“Yeah,” cried an older unicorn, “This isn’t a party. It’s a commemoration.”

“Leave him be!” shouted Azaria. “He may just be the storyteller, but he deserves respect too.”

“Yeah, but it’s not time for such shenanigans,” said one of the mares. “Ishmael desecrated Dorianna. He sawed off her horn.”

“And all the others who gave up their lives for the creatures too,” added a male, his voice rasping with hatred. “Who does Orpheus think he is anyway? Darius?”

Azaria raised a brow at the mention of the dinosaur’s name. “Come on, let’s hear him out,” he insisted. “He’s always good for a story or two. Besides, you haven’t heard what he has to say yet.”

“Oh, all right,” grumbled the angry male.

The crowd quieted down. Orpheus cleared his throat and began his story.

“It happened the other day. I was wandering down the trail where Dorianna died, when I saw a shimmering near her skeleton. I stared for a few moments, thinking my eyes had a film over them. After all, I’m not young anymore, and eyes grow dim with age. But what I saw was real. My heart leapt and I was just turning to flee, when I heard someone call my name. I stopped dead and turned to face whoever or *whatever* it was. The voice spoke again, saying that it was she, Dorianna, come back from the dead.”

Their eyes wide, the unicorns moved in closer to listen.

“I couldn’t really see her the way I see all of you now. It was more like peering through steam rising above a fire, only there was no flame. But I answered all the same and asked her what she wanted from me since I’m just the storyteller. She burst into tears and sobbed bitterly. I didn’t know what to do. Should I console her? After all, she was a ghost. So I waited. When her tears dried, she said she was angry with Ishmael for taking her

life before her time. She said to tell her family that she missed them, and that someday she hoped to see them again. And then she told me something that sent shivers down my spine." He paused.

"What? What?" The words traveled like a wave over the herd.

"She said ..." he dropped his voice low, "'Beware of Ishmael. He is a ruthless creature with no conscience, and he has far worse in store for all of you. Don't wait for his next move. You must *flee* him!'" His voice rose on the word flee.

Gasps rose from the herd.

Nathaniel moved forward to speak. "If what you're saying is true, then we should destroy Ishmael before he destroys the rest of us."

The young males brayed and thumped their hooves in support of his words.

"Silence," shouted Mohala.

The grumbling died down, but the faces remained sour.

"Violence is not the answer," Polaris said.

"And why not? We can't do anything else. We're all just sitting here waiting for Ishmael to capture or kill us. And pretty soon, there won't be any unicorns left!" Nathaniel neighed fiercely.

Polaris' eyes lit up dangerously. "It doesn't matter what we do or how many humans we kill," he said, his voice filled with venom, "because not a single one of you can open the pen! And until one of you figures out how, stop complaining!"

Dead silence met his words. The tension cut like thistles.

"Ah … I think I may have a solution," Azaria offered, his voice hesitant.

The unicorns rumbled again for a moment, and then quieted down.

"Speak then and share your idea," said Mohala.

“Someone mentioned Darius earlier.” He paused, and looked around. “I think I know where he is.”

The mares broke into high-pitched whinnies.

“But surely he’s dead.” cried one of them. “There wasn’t enough food.”

“No, he ran away from Ishmael because he knew he was in danger. He told me he had a purpose in life, and I think that it has something to do with us. And I’ll swear by the magic in my horn that he’s still alive and hiding out in the other valley. With Father’s permission, I can leave immediately and find him. I’m sure he’ll know what to do.”

The herd nickered with hope, and soon their voices rose in an exuberant chorus of unicorn chant.

“Let him go,” they called out. “Let him go.”

Mohala quieted them again.

“All right then, my son,” said Polaris. “You may go.”

Then as Azaria turned to leave, Polaris whispered in his ear, “And fast before the herd turns violent.”

Chapter Fifteen
Darius

Azaria had been walking for hours in the cold night air when the sun finally rose in all its promising glory. His shivering ceased when its rays warmed his body, and his pace quickened at the thought of seeing his old friend again. He imagined the look on Darius' face. Maybe the dinosaur already knew he was coming. Breaking into a canter, Azaria hurried until he spied the entrance to the valley, and then stopped.

Suppose he hasn't survived. What if I find him dead like the other dinosaurs?

Scenes of the destruction of the fireball haunted him. He trembled with fear, and then, gathering up his courage, he rounded the corner, his heart thudding hard in his chest. He took a few more steps and ... leapt with joy!

"It's beautiful. Oh, my gosh! It's like it was before the fireball. The waterfalls – everything! And so green ... except ... the plants *have* changed."

A ray of hope filled him. Could all this lush vegetation mean that Darius was alive and well? He didn't have long to find out, for there a ways before him, stood the tall dinosaur, full-grown now, waiting for him.

"Darius!" Azaria sprang forward and danced around the huge beast, holding back tears of happiness. "I've missed you so much."

The lofty dinosaur lowered his head to Azaria's level. "And I've missed you," he said, his eyes watering. "I never wanted to leave the herd, but I *had* to. It was the only way. I have a purpose to fulfill, and Ishmael would have taken that away from me if he found me." He shifted

uncomfortably. “It’s been difficult being alone.” Large teardrops plopped on the ground below, soaking it.

Azaria watched as Darius cried his eyes out. When the dinosaur’s tears finally subsided, Azaria took a deep breath and blurted out, “Darius, we need your help.”

“Why? What’s happened?”

“Ishmael captured Solomon’s herd and killed several of our kin by using them to heal the creatures-that-walk-on-two-legs.”

Darius thumped his tail hard, shaking the ground. “Did I not tell you all he was dangerous?” His voice thundered.

“Yes, but I was the only one who believed you. Polaris and the others thought he was harmless, and that’s why Ishmael was able to capture them. No one had their guard up – except me.”

Azaria recounted all that happened. He told of the nine unicorn deaths and the desecration of the skeletons. He described the dilemma of the tied trees and the threats made by the younger unicorns.

Darius listened intently, frowning and pacing. “Idiots,” he complained, shaking his head.

“And now, Orpheus claims to have seen Dorianna’s ghost. She says that Ishmael has far worse in mind. And I don’t know if Orpheus is just spinning one of his tales or if it’s for real.” He caught his breath and looked up pleading. “What can we do?”

Darius shook his head harder this time. “Ishmael is ruthless. He’s driven by his own greed and his desire for power. The man won’t stop until the very clothes he wears are woven of gold, and every one of the unicorns has been destroyed.”

The truth of Darius’ words struck Azaria with the force of one of Ishmael’s whips. He broke into a sweat. “But there must be something we

can do," he cried.

"There is," said Darius, his frown turning into a mischievous grin.

"What?" asked Azaria. "Tell me. I'll do anything."

Darius reached up to pull at some leaves high in a tree. He chewed on them before answering. "You say Dorianna's ghost has been seen?"

"Well, so Orpheus says."

Darius finished chewing the leaves and swallowed. "Then, you must become a ghost like her."

Azaria jerked his head back. "Ghost? Me? But I don't want to die."

Darius chuckled. "You don't need to."

"How then?" Azaria frowned.

"Simple. You see my shadow?" the dinosaur said, amusement dancing in his eyes.

"Yes."

"Try and catch it!"

Azaria snorted. "I can't, Darius. Everyone knows you can't catch a shadow because it isn't real. It's just a play of light."

"Exactly, and that's how you'll gain power over Ishmael," replied Darius matter-of-factly. "A ghost is like a shadow. And once you become a shadow, no one, not even Ishmael can capture you. Not to mention you might scare the bejeebers out of him."

"Alright ... so how do I do this?"

"Easy. You must think like a shadow, move like the wind, and become a part of nature in a breath."

Azaria let out an exasperated sigh. "Well, I don't know how to do that."

"Ah, but you can if you are willing. Are you ready to begin learning?" Darius asked.

The unicorn paused a moment, and then replied with enthusiasm, “Yes!”

“Good. Now start galloping!”

Azaria smiled at Darius as though the dinosaur had just asked him to do something easy like chew on grass or breathe, and then broke into a gallop. He ran several circles around the dinosaur, and then came back, his eyebrows raised, poised for the praise that was certain to follow.

“You're a fast runner, but not fast enough,” Darius said.

Azaria’s face fell. “Well, I know I’m not the quickest in my herd, but I’m still *fairly* fast.”

“But you’re still not as fast as the wind.” He pointed his long neck toward one of the old Rexus caverns. “Gallop to the cave over there, but this time *become* the wind.”

The unicorn flew. He kicked up his heels as high as ever, taking great leaps, and lunging forward. His muscles burned, and his lungs felt as though they would burst. He returned from the cave, puffing and sweating.

“Well? How was that?” he asked, his mouth drawn up in an expectant grin.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you run that fast,” said Darius.

Azaria held his head high.

“But … you were merely a unicorn galloping.”

“What?” Azaria stamped a hoof. “But that’s what I am! I can’t go any faster than that!”

“Ah, but you can. How do you think *I* got there so quickly when the Rexus was after Jemmi?”

Azaria shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“I *became* the wind. That’s how. That means you have to be a part of it. You must feel its breath blow strong – and absorb its power,” Darius

explained, his voice rising and falling.

Azaria heaved a sigh, and then pulled himself up to his full height. He waited, his senses piqued. A small breeze tugged at his mane and tickled his skin. It was cool and light, yet strong. Then he felt a gust, leapt, and ... caught it! It carried him as he galloped. He was doing it – Azaria was riding the wind! Power surged through him. Excitement coursed through his body, and he nearly called out. But just as suddenly as he had captured the gust, he lost it and was just galloping again. Slowing to a stop, he turned to Darius, his eyebrows raised almost to his ears.

“That was it, wasn’t it?”

“It *was*,” Darius’ voice burst with joy. “And now you must continue to practice this daily until you’re able to do it without thinking.”

“You bet I will!” Azaria galloped away to try again. He spent the rest of the day repeating the exercise until he was exhausted, thrilled with his new power. He imagined the surprise of the other yearlings when they saw him race at this new speed. But remembering them also filled him with loneliness. And when night arrived, he collapsed into a deep sleep, dreaming of his family and the days before the fireball.

Two weeks passed – two splendid weeks in the valley with Darius. Azaria was certain he was the fastest unicorn that ever lived. He fantasized racing with the swiftest stallions, and of course, always winning. But something troubled him.

One night, he wandered to the clear pool of water where the bright moon’s reflection glowed. He dipped his head in to take a drink and heard a snap. A shrill whinny escaped him, and he hurdled backward, landing on his rump in the water.

Darius, close by, lowered his long neck. “Why so jumpy?” he asked, hiding a smile.

“I heard a noise. I thought it was a –” He paused.

“A what?” asked Darius.

“Well, a ... a –”

“Azaria, you’re a unicorn. You have no enemies other than the humans, and I’m here beside you. What could possibly scare you?”

Raising himself up out of the water and shaking off the drops, Azaria ignored the question and dipped his lips in the water again to drink.

“Azaria?” persisted Darius.

“All right!” Azaria scowled. “I thought you were Dorianna’s ghost!”

“What? Dorianna’s ghost? Why on earth would that scare you?”

“I ... I ... I’m scared she’ll haunt me,” he said, avoiding his friend’s gaze.

Darius threw his head back and laughed loud and long. “But Dorianna was your friend.”

“Yeah, she was,” said Azaria, “but …”

“Then why should you be afraid of her in death?”

“Well –” Azaria tilted his head.

“It’s Ishmael who should be frightened. He’s the one who wronged her.” Darius grabbed some more leaves with his teeth and chewed them.

Azaria turned away, pondering his words. “I suppose you’re right.”

“She’s on your side,” Darius said.

Azaria thought a moment. “You really think so?”

“Definitely. Do you see me jumping at every sound because it might be my mother?” Darius’ lips twitched with amusement.

“No. Of course not.”

“Well then?”

Azaria breathed a sigh of relief and relaxed. He chuckled a bit at the silliness of it all and decided from that moment on, he would never fear a

ghost again.

The next morning, he and Darius wandered to the meadow.

Darius quizzed Azaria. “What do you do if you see Ishmael and one of his men?” he asked.

Confident, Azaria shot back, “You become one with the wind, and flee as fast as possible.”

Darius raised his brows. “That’s one way, but there’s another.”

“What?” asked Azaria.

“You must be able to transform yourself into a rock or a tree, or anything that is near you in but a moment.”

“But how? I’m made of flesh and bones.”

“Let me show you,” said the dinosaur.

Azaria watched with interest. A large bird squawked nearby. He glanced away for only a moment, but when he turned back, Darius had disappeared. Azaria searched about, turning a complete circle.

“Darius? Where are you?” he called. “Darius?” The dinosaur didn’t answer. “Darius! This isn’t funny!”

The unicorn trotted toward the cave, thinking for sure Darius had hidden himself inside, but stopped abruptly when he saw a portion of the cave transform itself into the familiar form of the tall dinosaur. Azaria jumped backward.

“How did you do that?”

Darius grinned from ear to ear. “I became one with the land,” he said as though it was the easiest thing in the world. “Just like I did when we used to play hide and seek.”

“But how can you? You’re like me. You’re made of flesh and bones.”

“I just did and you can do it too. Try.”

“You mean like this?” Azaria asked. He twisted and turned his torso trying to mimic a rock with a tree sticking up.

Darius began chuckling. Soon, he was rolling around on the ground, his huge body shaking the earth with giant spasms of laughter.

Untwisting himself, Azaria glared at Darius. “What’s so funny?” he asked, burning with humiliation.

“You, Azaria. You look like a unicorn pretending to be a rock and a tree.” He rolled and howled again.

Azaria fumed. Hot air snorted from his nostrils and his eyes bulged. “It’s not funny!” he shouted. “I’m not a dinosaur. I’m a unicorn. I’m meant to run and play.” He turned to leave in a huff, stomping his hooves hard on the ground.

Darius’ laughter subsided, and his eyes softened as he rolled his great mass up to his feet. “Don’t go, Azaria. Times have changed. The unicorns *used* to run and play. But now they have to run and survive.”

Azaria stopped and faced Darius. “Okay,” he said, his face knotted into a scowl.

“Try again, only this time, think of the cave and how it was formed. You’re very old and have been there for thousands of years. Many seasons have passed; many animals have used you for shelter ...”

Azaria listened, his eyes glazed as the words washed over him. He began whispering, “I am the cave, I am the cave, I am the cave.” Visions of seasons passing – no – many seasons, hundreds of seasons, and animals coming and going, slid through his mind like water through polished stones. Then it happened. He felt his body reshape.

Azaria saw Darius’ gaze pass right through him. The dinosaur looked about, then back to the spot again.

I’m invisible. He can’t see me.

A bird cawed, startling Azaria. His concentration gone, he transformed back to himself.

“Was that it?” he asked, prancing. “Was it? Was it?”

“Yes! You did it. Now practice this some more and when you have mastered it, you’ll be ready for the last step.”

“I will.” Azaria promised as he bounded away.

Chapter Sixteen
Fight and Flight

Ishmael sat at the table counting his gold, his face lit up like a bandit's lantern. He weighed the heavy metal in the palm of his dirty hands and proceeded to make several piles, chuckling to himself.

"Do you realize how much more gold we can make with the healing powder?" he asked Adiva, his eyebrows wiggling with glee.

"No," she said, running warm water over Ali in her bath. The little girl squealed at the sensation of the liquid tickling her skin.

"Far more than we did during the plague." He chuckled again. "And do you realize that if we slaughtered the rest of the unicorns in the pen, we could be rich beyond our wildest dreams?" His eyes narrowed in delight and his lips curved up in a nasty grin as he envisioned himself parading into town wearing rich linens and shoes made of the finest leather.

"What are you talking about?" Adiva stopped washing the child and flung around to face her husband, her wet hands dripping on her hips. "You're not going to kill those animals?"

"Why not? I can't wait around for another plague, and I don't want to be dragging those wild unicorns all over town so people can touch their horns. It's easier this way."

Adiva took two heated steps toward her husband, her shoes scuffling against the floor. "But you'll kill them all and there won't be any left afterward."

"There's always the spring," he said. "There'll be more foals."

"But you'll slaughter them just as fast as they're born. How can you? Those animals were born to run free. You have to leave them be," she

argued, her face locked in a frown.

Ishmael rolled his eyes and gave his usual answer. “They’re just animals, Adiva.”

“Mama, I’m cold,” whimpered Ali, shivering in the bath water.

Their voices rose as the argument grew more intense.

“Mama! I’m cold!” Ali cried again.

“Can’t you keep her quiet?” growled Ishmael, his temper mounting.

“But you musn’t kill the unicorns!” Adiva shouted.

“I’ll do as I please,” he roared back.

“Mama!”

Ishmael threw his hands to his ears and left, slamming the door behind him.

There’s nothing I hate worse than the wailing of a child, except the nagging of my wife.

Walking off his anger, he headed to town, searching for men whose hungry eyes spoke of desperation, men who would do anything he asked for a few coins and a supper. Finding several drifters whose dirty clothes hung in rags, he gathered them together and brought them to his home.

“Here’s what we’ll do,” he explained. “We’ll tie all the unicorns separately so that they can’t reach each other. Then when I give the signal, we’ll all shoot our bows at exactly the same moment and kill them all off. We must be sure they can’t reach each other with their horns or they’ll survive. It’s the only way.”

The hungry, ill-clad men nodded, stealing eager glances at Adiva while she prepared food for them. Ishmael noted the hard jabs of her spoon as she cooked, and how she slammed the plates with a thud, but ignored her.

After the men filled their empty stomachs, he sent them with their bedrolls to the small shed a short walk from the house for the night.

“I’ll get you up just before sunrise,” he said before turning down the path to the house.

The next morning, the sun had already risen when Ishmael awoke.

“What?” he mumbled. “Why did I wake up so late?” He rolled over and sat up. The house was cold and the morning fire hadn’t been lit. All was quiet. Not even Ali’s little voice could be heard.

“Where’s the child?” he said aloud. “Adiva? Adiva, where are you?” He paced around the house searching each room, confused. “She must be outside.”

Ishmael swung the door open. He squinted, his eyes adjusting to the daylight. Then he rubbed them and looked about. Something was wrong. The holding pen ... it was ...

“What?” he shouted. “Where did they go?” His feet pounding, he ran to the shed where the men were bedded down and threw the door open. “What did you do with them?” he hollered. “I give you food and you steal my unicorns?” He aimed a swift kick at one of the men. Missing, Ishmael grabbed him by the shoulders.

The man gave a helpless look at the others. “We didn’t steal your unicorns. Look, we’re all here. No one’s gone. We’ve been here all night.”

“Yeah, besides, where would we put them?” asked another, coming to the first man’s side.

Ishmael did a quick count of the men. Reality struck him full force.

“Adiva!” he shouted, his voice thundering. “Where are you? I give you all the riches you could ever want and this is how you repay me? Adiva?”

The sound of the wind mocked him.

He tore into the house and stopped, seeing what he had failed to notice before. All his wife’s things were gone, and Ali’s too. On the table, lay a laurel wreath like the ones he found beside the unicorn skeletons.

“It was her! She’s the one who’s been leaving the wreaths. She’s been against me all this time!”

Ishmael threw over the table and chairs and pounded his fists on the wall.

“How could my wife deceive me like that? My wife!”

He covered his eyes with his rough hands, backed into a corner, and slid to the ground. He sat there for a time, clenching and unclenching his fists, and then slowly rose, his face transforming to a nasty scowl as his thoughts took shape.

“You want to make a fool of me in front of the whole town, woman? Well, I still have my men, and I’ll hunt every one of those scrawny unicorns down and kill them. And you can’t stop me.”

Chapter Seventeen
The Shadow-Walk

“And now, Azaria, you have one final skill to learn. It’s the most difficult one of all,” said Darius.

“Oh, good! What is it?” Azaria asked, feeling very confident after mastering riding the wind and camouflaging.

“You must walk from here to that rock through the mud without making a sound or leaving any traces,” said Darius as he shifted around his weight, making himself comfortable.

“Not a problem.” Azaria grinned. He walked as quietly as he could, concentrating on the task and sure of success. But after only one step, he heard the unmistakable splitch-splotch of his hooves sucking up the mud. Looking back from the other side, his ears flattened, he cried, “They’re all there!”

“Ah, but not all of them,” Darius said, a hint of smile playing on his lips.

Azaria looked up, hopeful, but confused.

“Where are the prints of your shadow?” the dinosaur asked.

Azaria’s face returned to its former scowl. “Well, there aren’t any because my shadow’s not real.”

“But I distinctly saw it follow you as you went along.”

Azaria stared at Darius, utterly puzzled.

Darius continued. “Try again, Azaria, and this time, *think* as a shadow. *Move* as one. *Be* one. Shadows make no sound and leave no traces.”

The unicorn scrunched his brows in deep concentration. He imagined he was a shadow, grey and misty, that he was light and airy, and began the

walk again, this time riding on the tips of his hooves. He took only a few steps when one of his hooves caught a stone, and he slipped, landing headlong into the mire. Struggling to rise, he lost his balance again, but forced himself up, grimacing at his muddy coat.

"Shadow, my eye!" he growled. "No one can be a shadow. Not even you. I bet you can't do it either!"

Darius pursed his lips and lugged his gigantic body up. "Watch and listen," he said. His large feet shaking the ground as he moved, Darius plodded to the edge of the mud, and placed one foot forward. When the other three followed, he transformed, floating, yet at the same time walking as though a spirit.

Azaria's jaw hung. "How did you do that?"

"Simple. I was one with my shadow," Darius said as though nothing unusual happened. "You weren't. You were imitating what you perceive a shadow to be."

"But ... I –"

"Try again," said Darius.

"But –"

"Just try again!" Darius's voice was firm.

Azaria let go. His eyes glazed, and he stepped into the mud, this time with his spirit. His body felt hollow and his mind was as silent as the stars. Feeling breathless as though he had lost matter, he began to glide. He moved with ease, stepping forward several steps, no sound – just he and his shadow. Elation filled him.

I'm doing it! I'm really doing it!

His heart beating fast, he quickened his pace only to hear the dreaded sound again – splitch-splotch. He hurried to the other side, spun about, and stared. There *were* a few hoof prints there, but most of them were missing.

“Darius? he cried, his voice booming with excitement. “I did it for a few steps, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did.” The dinosaur smiled so wide all his large molars showed. “And now you must continue to practice this until you can do it instantly. And once you can, you will be ready to save your herd.”

Azaria gladly obeyed Darius, practicing for days. At the end of the week, he had mastered the near impossible skill. “I’m pretty good now, right?” he asked, his chest puffing out.

Darius lowered his head to Azaria’s height. “Yes, you’ve done well, but now it’s time for you to leave.”

Startled, Azaria took a step back. “What?” he asked.

“You must leave now,” Darius repeated.

“But, I don’t feel like I’m ready,” he said. “I know I haven’t always been polite, and that you were just trying to help, but I’ve been scared – really.”

“Azaria, you must leave now,” Darius repeated again, his voice growing urgent.

“But, what if Ishmael is too strong, and I go back to find them all dead?” Droplets of sweat beaded his forehead.

“Your enemy has already been defeated. Ishmael has human foes too. When you return, you’ll find your friends have been freed and reunited,” he said. “But you must leave now; otherwise you *may* be too late. The herds are very angry and there’ll be violence against the humans if you don’t stop them. And if the unicorns attack the humans, they’ll destroy your species. So go now. You’re needed.”

Azaria stood undecided for a moment, and then broke into a canter. He sped up a knoll, but paused momentarily to call to his friend. “Good-bye, Darius. I’ll be back soon, I hope.”

“Good-bye, my good friend,” Darius replied.

Chapter Eighteen
The Return

The day had turned somber when Azaria arrived at dusk. A heavy black cloud hung over the valley and the skies threatened to burst. He stood camouflaged on a ridge, watching the unicorns hovering together – something was terribly wrong.

“It’s a done deal,” growled Nathaniel, facing off Polaris. “We’re attacking the creatures-that-walk-on-two-legs tonight.”

“No, Nathaniel! Violence is not the way of the unicorns,” said Polaris, his voice strained.

“This is a new era, old stallion,” neighed Zackary from beside Nathaniel. “You’re not the one who sat locked in by the tied trees day after day wondering if you’d live or not. Every time that sun rose, we wondered if that would be the day we’d die and every time it set, we thanked the heavens we were still alive.” Zackary bared his teeth. “I don’t ever want to live through that again. It’s time we did something!”

“B-but at least wait until Azaria comes back,” Polaris stammered.

How shrunken Father looks. So old. I hope I’m not too late.

“Azaria is dead!” roared Nathaniel. “Can’t you understand that?”

“You don’t know that for sure,” said Polaris, moving back a step.

“A full moon has come and gone since we last saw him,” brayed Nathaniel. “He’s not coming back.”

Azaria spied Aurora standing close by, her jaw clenched in fear.

“No, tonight’s the night. It’s us or them. We’ll attack the creatures and kill them off,” insisted Nathaniel.

“I agree,” said Zackary, moving next to Nathaniel.

“But at least wait until the next full moon,” pleaded Polaris.

Nathaniel snorted in disgust and turned his back on Polaris. He lead the other young unicorns away, their fierce neighs ringing in a battle cry. “Not this time, old one,” he said, tossing a defiant glance back over his shoulder. “It’s time someone got something done.”

It’s now or never!

Azaria caught the wind and landed directly in Nathaniel’s path, his feet planted hard in the ground.

The unicorns whinnied in fright.

“It’s Azaria’s ghost!” screamed Jemmi.

“Oh, no! That’s all we need – to be haunted on top of everything else,” neighed Cassi.

The unicorns stood frozen until Jemmi finally whimpered, “Maybe he has a message for us.”

“Message, my hoof,” cried Azaria, a broad smile spreading over his face. “It’s me – Azaria!”

“Azaria?” Their eyes grew twice their size.

“But how can that be?” asked Aurora. “You just appeared before our very eyes. No one can do that. You *must* be a spirit.”

“No, mother. I’m *like* a spirit. Darius taught me how. Remember how he could hide and sneak up on us anytime even though he was huge?”

“Yes,” said Aurora.

“Well, that’s what he taught me.”

“What do you mean?” asked Polaris, his head tilted to one side.

“Like this.” Azaria disappeared, blending into the landscape.

“Where did he go?” cried Nathaniel, circling about, his eyes searching.

“Right here.” Azaria laughed as he reappeared.

“But you vanished,” Nathaniel said, his mouth hanging open.

“No, I merely camouflaged myself, and you can too.”

Azaria turned to Zackary. “Care to race?”

“I don’t have time for this nonsense,” grumbled Zackary pushing past him.

Azaria caught the wind, landing on the trail ahead of Zackary.

Zackary jumped back, and then looked behind him. “But ... no unicorn can run that fast,” he exclaimed, his anger turning to awe.

“You can if you’re the wind.” Azaria grinned from ear to ear. “Now watch. This is the best part.”

He glided through a muddy stretch of trail while the others watched and listened.

“But there wasn’t a sound,” exclaimed Gaelan. “And no prints ... what?”

Azaria faced the herd. “It’s called the shadow-walk. I can teach all of you how to do this if you follow me. Then we’ll have a much better chance of survival.”

“But we’ve made our plans,” said Zackary, his voice losing its edge.

“Zackary, we’ve known each other since we were colts. Have I ever led you astray?” asked Azaria.

The angry unicorn’s expression faded, and he shook his head.

“Anger and hate begets more anger and hate. Come with me and I’ll show you another way. We’ll become shadow unicorns and defeat Ishmael together.”

The young unicorns exchanged glances, the tension melting away.

“Okay, I’m willing to try,” said Zackary, seeming more like the old Zackary from days gone by.

“Okay, I will too.” Nathaniel snorted. “But if it doesn’t work, we attack the creatures.”

“And, by the way, they’re called humans,” Azaria said. “Darius told me.”

“Humans?” said Aurora. “Then humans it is.”

“When can we begin?” asked Polaris, looking relieved.

“Immediately,” said Azaria. “Darkness is falling. We’ll travel all night to Darius’ valley. And there we’ll start.”

The journey was long and hard, but when they arrived in the bountiful valley, Darius was there to greet them. Joy and hope ran through the herd as they reunited with their friend and wept tears of happiness.

The training began that very day. Azaria was a good teacher and had learned his lessons from Darius well. He taught the old and the young while Darius himself taught the vigilantes. By the next full moon, they were ready.

Chapter Nineteen
The Deception

Frustration swept through Ishmael as he prepped his cronies to ambush the unicorns.

“I know what I saw,” said one of his men, breathing hard. “It was the ghost of a unicorn, and she was standing right next to where her bones lay!”

“Ridiculous.” Ishmael waved the idea away. “There are no such things as ghosts.”

“But I swear I saw the mare in the fog. She was beckoning me. I yelled and ran as fast as I could to get away!” The man’s voice trembled.

“Did she follow you?” asked one of the other men, twisting his rope nervously around his fingers.

“No, but I just know something’s going to happen. I think she was trying to warn me,” replied the first man.

“I’ve heard of others who have seen her too,” someone else cried.

“Maybe we shouldn’t go,” said one of the other men, his voice pitched high.

Ishmael knew he had to do something soon, or he would lose his men to superstition. His fortune had dwindled, and he was desperate to harvest more unicorn horns. Without the help of his men, his plans to take the healing powder upriver to the next town would die.

“It’s just a trick of the mist.” Ishmael shook his head. “There’s been so much talk, that you’re imagining things.”

“I know what I saw if the gods be my witnesses,” the man insisted, his eyes wide with fright.

Desperate, Ishmael made a quick decision.

“Okay, okay. I know you’re all scared, but if you come with me, I’ll give each of you a cut of the healing powder when the job is done.”

His offer was met by momentary silence, and then one by one, the men broke into toothy smiles, mumbling their agreement.

“Let’s go,” Ishmael ordered, leading his men to the saddled horses.

The men mounted their steeds, falling behind Ishmael in the fading light.

They rode in silence, hoping to surprise the unicorns. The setting sun painted the sky a golden orange while the birds returned squawking from their feeding grounds to roost in their nests for the night. They had been riding for about twenty minutes when Ishmael spied the unicorns grazing from afar.

“There they are!” he said, keeping his voice low. He whipped his horse into action, his heart pounding. The men followed close behind.

Ishmael could almost taste the victory, as they galloped along. But as they got closer, the unicorns melted into the landscape.

He pulled up his horse, his men nearly catapulting into him from behind.

“Did you see that?” cried one of the men. “They’re gone. Just like that.”

“A trick of the light,” Ishmael muttered. “Those large stones just *looked* like unicorns grazing.” He scrutinized the land, scanning left and right. “Let’s keep riding,” he said at last. Spurring his horse forward, he searched in the dwindling light, and then froze. Five lengths ahead of him stood Azaria, snorting and puffing. Ishmael sprang into action, but the unicorn disappeared.

“Where did he go?” cried one of the cronies, his voice shaking.

The men searched about, frantic.

“Follow its tracks,” ordered Ishmael, squeezing his horse’s sides.

“There’re no hoof prints,” cried one of the men. “It’s gotta be a ghost!”

Ishmael descended his mount to examine the earth.

“Look,” hollered another one of the cronies, pointing.

There, floating before them again, beckoning and whinnying in mocking neighs, was Azaria.

“I was right. They’re spirits!” one of the men yelled. “It’s the ghosts of all those unicorns Ishmael slaughtered! I’m getting out of here!” He spun his horse around, whipping it into a gallop, the others close behind.

“Wait, you fools. They’re not ghosts, I tell you. They’re just unicorns!”

Ishmael let out a frustrated huff, and then dug his heels in his mount’s sides, steering it in the direction of the unicorn. The horse reeled and tried to stampede with the others. Ishmael yanked the reins. The animal twisted and lost its balance, throwing Ishmael from the saddle. Ishmael landed in a heap, and lost consciousness. Several minutes later, he awoke to the furious hoof beats of his horse as it galloped away. He sat up slowly, catching his breath, and gazed to where the unicorns had disappeared. The colours of the sunset had faded and with it the light, but there in the growing shadow stood the herd of unicorns, whinnying with glee.

“Spirits, my eye,” he said with a menacing tone.

Chapter Twenty
The Hoodlums

Two full moons had passed since their triumph against Ishmael and his cronies, and though Azaria and Gaelan remained wary, the young renegade unicorns began to show signs of cockiness.

“That was so funny that night. You were right, Azaria. They’ll never catch us again,” Zackary brayed as half-chewed grass fell from his full mouth.

“Yeah, remember Ishmael’s men?” Nathaniel guffawed. “They were so scared.”

“I know. They ran so fast and never even looked back.” Zackary hoo-hawed, more chewed food dropping onto his white coat.

“I’m glad you tried it Darius’ way,” said Azaria. “If you had attacked the humans, it would have never ended.”

“Yeah, well … whatever.” Nathaniel rolled onto his back and paddled his hooves in the air, scratching his back against some stubbly grass.

“Hey, guess what, guys. I heard some of the mares are with foal,” Gaelan announced, smiling. “Now our herds will grow again.”

“Mmmm,” mumbled Zackary between bites.

“Yeah, I heard Aurora is expecting. You’ll have a little brother or sister soon, Azaria.” Gaelan raised his brow, his lips pressed together in a congratulatory grin.

“Yup. And next thing you know, *we’ll* be the ones choosing mates,” Azaria replied.

Something in the woods snapped. Azaria swung his head around, but saw nothing.

“Yeah, I noticed Jemmi’s gotten to be quite the mare, eh?” Gaelan winked.

“And did you get a look at the mane on Cassi? What a filly!” Zackary brayed.

“Not for me,” said Nathaniel, rolling over onto his stomach. “I’ve got better things to do.”

“Yeah, right. Like what?” asked Azaria.

“Ah, you know ... stuff,” he said off-handedly, rising back up to his feet.

As if on cue, Zackary piped up, his eyes bright with mischief. “Hey, Gaelan, a bunch of the guys were thinking of going into town tonight to scare the humans. Wanna come?”

“I’m in for sure.” Nathaniel nodded.

“Not a good idea, guys,” warned Azaria, giving Zackary a piercing look. “Ishmael’s a lot smarter than you think. I say we stay far from the town, keep them believing we’re spirits.”

“Oh, they’ll think we’re spirits all right,” said Zackary tearing off more grass to chomp on while talking. “I have no intention of spending time inside the tied trees again.”

“You mean the fence, Zackary. That’s what Darius called it.”

“Yeah, whatever.”

“No, seriously, Zackary, these humans are dangerous. I wouldn’t go anywhere near ...” Again Azaria heard a snap. He scanned the woods. A moving figure caught his eye.

“Human! Camouflage!” he hissed.

The unicorns blended into the landscape, barely breathing, until they heard running steps retreat.

Azaria was the first to transform back. “I don’t like the looks of that,” he said to Gaelan. “We’d better warn the others.”

“I agree. Let’s go!”

The young unicorns galloped through a scarcely used path, Nathaniel and Zackary trailing behind, guffawing and belching as they went. When they found the other unicorns, Azaria flew to his father’s side and recounted the story.

“I’ve been feeling like we’re being watched for a while now, and I don’t like it,” he finished.

“Neither do I. Sounds like Ishmael’s up to no good and he’s getting too close. I’ll gather up the herd tonight and hide them in the grey forest. The humans never go there,” said Polaris. “I think they think it’s haunted.”

Azaria thought of the skeleton of forest that still stood as a dismal reminder of the fireball. “Okay, Father.”

That night, as the moon rose and the jackals’ howls filled the air, the unicorns lay low in the shadows of the dark and foreboding trees, like phantoms drifting in and out of the underworld. All was quiet except for hushed whisperings and the odd soft steps on the soil.

After a time, Azaria grew restless and sought out Gaelan.

His friend stood alone, mesmerized by the moon. “Remember the night of the fireball?” he said. “It was a night like this we all sang with the jackals. How young we were.”

“Yes, I remember. And we played with other foals in the water? Remember when Nathaniel and Zackary ...” Azaria stopped in mid-sentence. “Speaking of Nathaniel and Zackary, where are those two idiots?” He glanced around.

“I don’t know,” said Gaelan, scanning the surrounding white skeletons of trees. “And where are the other young males from the other herds?”

Azaria gasped, his eyes wide with fear. “Do you think they went into the town like they said they would?”

“Oh, my gosh!” Gaelan exclaimed.

“Let’s go!” said Azaria.

Plunging forward, they galloped at full speed toward the town. Sweat poured off their sides as they ran, and they snorted and puffed as they flew. They arrived in time to hear a blood-curdling scream.

“Look!” Gaelan pointed with his horn. “It’s Nathaniel.”

Below, a woman, her face twisted in terror ran for her life. Nathaniel followed on her heels, disappearing and reappearing while his mates guffawed.

“They’re fooling the humans into thinking they’re ghosts by camouflaging!” exclaimed Azaria.

Azaria sprang forward to stop them from further harm, but not fast enough. The renegade unicorns shadow-walked to the town square where several humans were gathered for a wedding. Zackary leapt through the group, wailing like a banshee, and disappeared. The humans panicked. They fled through the rows of tables, overturning them and spilling the carefully prepared feast on the ground. Nathaniel made for the bride and grabbed the hem of her dress in his big, yellow teeth. The dress tore with a loud rip as the shrieking bride struggled to escape. He let go with a loud whinny and joined Zackary, appearing and disappearing before the fleeting crowd. The mob ploughed forward into the streets, pushing and shoving, hurrying to the safety of their homes. They knocked over an elderly man in their desperation. The man cowered and called for help, but no one heard him. The renegade unicorns laughed cruelly.

Azaria waited until the last of the humans fled, and then dove at the young unicorns. “You idiots! Do you want us to be killed?” he shouted.

“Hey man, we’re just having a bit of fun.” Zackary chortled.

“Well it’s not fun! You’re scaring them!” Azaria neighed. “And someone was injured!”

“I don’t care. They kept me locked up in the tied trees and I could have died. They deserve it!” sneered Zackary, his laughter turned to rage.

“You mean the fence. And it wasn’t them, lame brain. Ishmael was the one who captured you. These people are completely innocent. And the rest of you, following along like little lemmings. Unicorns are supposed to be much smarter than that! What’s wrong with the lot of you?” Azaria roared.

“Ah, you think you know everything don’t you? You’re just like your old father. Always gotta be the good little colt. Aw, how cute.” Zackary’s mocking face changed into a scowl. “You’ll never fit in with us. We’re the new unicorns. We do as we please.” He turned to face his friends, but his expression fell when his mates moved to Azaria’s side.

From the corner of his eye, Azaria spied the elderly gentleman struggling to pull himself up.

“I’ll take care of it,” said Gaelan. He walked toward the old man, his hooves clip-clopping on the stones in earthly fashion, and gently touched the trembling man’s leg with his horn. The human cringed at first, but then relaxed at the sight of Gaelan’s gentle eyes.

“You’re one of the real ones, aren’t you?” The old man smiled. “And you’re healing me.” The elderly gentleman sat still as the heat coursed through his body. Then he rubbed his newly-healed leg and rose.

“Now let’s go,” ordered Azaria looking each unicorn in the eye. “If you want to stay here, Zackary, go ahead, but I won’t let you put the others in danger.”

The young unicorns turned to leave. Zackary sulked at the desertion of his fellow hoodlums and followed a short distance behind. They hurried

along the trail avoiding Ishmael's house. When they neared the forest, a zinging sound split the air, followed by an ominous thud.

"I've been hit!" screamed Zackary. "Stop!"

Azaria looked back to see Zackary, an arrow buried in his flank, and a half-hidden Ishmael grinning from ear to ear.

More arrows flung through the air. Azaria dodged them.

"We can't. We've got to keep moving!" he shouted.

"Fly!"

"But it hurts!" Zackary cried. "Please, Azaria, stop!"

The unicorns ignored his pleas, galloping furiously. Azaria checked back several times to keep an eye on Zackary who lagged further and further behind. After what seemed like an eternity, they finally halted, their sides heaving. Zackary limped toward them, dragging a leg, blood pouring from his flank.

Azaria grabbed the arrow with his teeth and pulled with all his might, dislodging it, before quickly touching his horn to the wound. The gash melted from sight. Zackary blubbered, his sobs racking his body.

"Not so tough now, are you?" Azaria snarled.

"I'm sorry. All I wanted to do was have a bit of fun. They think we're spirits, right?"

"Not anymore they don't," Azaria growled, "thanks to you – and the rest of you too."

The young unicorns moped, not meeting his gaze.

"Now we're really in danger. Ishmael knows our secret and to make matters worse, you've all made enemies of the humans too. The whole situation is far more serious than it ever was. Now let's go!"

The unicorns shadow-walked into the forest, tired but relieved when they joined the rest of the herd. The mares exclaimed at the sight of the

dried blood on Zackary’s side, but Azaria said nothing. As far as he was concerned, he had dealt with the incident. All they could do now was wait and see how the humans would react.

Chapter Twenty-One
The Scorning

Ishmael strode through the spoils the townsfolk worked hard to clean. He stepped over rotting food and shook his head at the tables and chairs scattered everywhere.

Fools. All this over a bit of superstition.

Stopping at the square, he stared, smirking at the disarray.

“It was him,” wailed an old hag, her wrinkled mouth opening to reveal rotten teeth as she cried.

“It’s his fault.” An old man pointed his long bony finger at Ishmael. “You killed the unicorns, and now they’ve come back to haunt us.”

“You ruined my daughter’s wedding,” roared the cloth merchant, his arms crossed and legs planted like strong pillars in the ground. “You should be driven out!”

Ishmael pushed his way down the street, deaf to their words, maintaining his proud stride.

For two months, he’d watched the unicorns, always staying hidden in the deep recesses and cool shadows of the woods. Seeing them disappear at the slightest hint of danger, he noted they reappeared after it passed. He also observed they could change from their normal clodhopping pace to a silent, graceful, almost floating gait when spooked. But most revealing of all, he noticed they ate and left droppings just the same as any other animal.

“They’re not spirits,” he said. “They’ve just learned a few tricks, that’s all. Just like horses can be taught to pull a wagon, unicorns can be taught to hide themselves. I’ve seen it. I even struck one last night with an arrow. It bled just as any other beast would have.”

“Lies! Lies!” cried the cloth merchant. “You’ve brought bad luck on us all. The whole town is cursed now.”

Ishmael stood before the people, ready to prove his superiority when he spotted a boy, his hands and face smeared with dirt, searching among the spoils of the wedding. His eyes gleaming, the boy grabbed a bruised apple and flung it at him. Ishmael ducked, but the boy wouldn’t be deterred. He aimed another apple at Ishmael’s stomach with all his might. It struck him square on.

“You!” shouted Ishmael, holding his stomach. “I’ll get you for that.” He ran to the boy and seized his arm. The boy screamed. Ishmael raised his fist, but stopped when he spied a small girl cowering in a corner against the rough bricks of a building.

Ali! My daughter. You’re still here. But where is ...?

And then he saw her. His wife stood cloaked in the shadows, resentment etched on her face, reluctantly meeting his gaze.

“Adiva,” he pleaded. “Where did you ...”

Before Ishmael could finish his sentence, she hurried away. Ali ran to catch her mother’s hand.

Anger surged through Ishmael.

How dare she turn away from me. Who does she think she is?

Determined as ever, he faced the people again. “No! I tell you, they’re made of flesh and blood just as you and I, and I’ll prove it to you.”

He spied two of his cronies who had crept out from the hovels and shelters they had constructed, silently watching the commotion. Their faces were gaunt and their skin sallow from hunger. Ishmael regarded them with new hope.

“You two! Come ride with me again. Find the others and together we’ll capture the unicorns and bring back their horns to prove it.”

“No, not their horns. You’ll have to kill them first,” shouted the baker’s wife.

The angry voices of the crowd erupted again. Following the boy’s example, they too picked up the spoils of the wedding and began pelting Ishmael.

“Break the curse!” shouted the hag, throwing a soft tomato.

“Ishmael must go,” cried the old man, bending to pick up some slop.

“Leave!” bellowed the merchant, pointing a strong arm at Ishmael.

Ishmael’s heart raced. He realized he was in grave danger. Running, he stooped and dodged the rubbish. A jagged piece of bone caught his shin, and he screamed in pain, the blood trickling on his clothes. Something hard hit his neck, smarting.

“You’ll see,” he cried. “You’ll all see.” He turned to his cronies. “Men, if you have the guts, you’ll join me – tonight!” Then he fled, humiliation burning within him.

That evening, Ishmael waited hidden in the dark shadows of his home. He lit no candles in case the townspeople should find him. His clothes were torn and stained, the stench of the rotten food filling his nostrils. Tears streaked his face when he remembered the sweet and chubby face of his daughter Ali.

“I had no idea how much I loved that little girl,” he whispered aloud, remembering her bright eyes and soft curls. “I was too busy making gold to realize it.” Loneliness ripped his soul. Remembering Ali’s bruised little body when she lay dying of the plague, remorse overcame him. “I’m sorry I didn’t help when you were so sick. I was just too scared. And now I’ve lost both of you.”

Self-righteousness filled him when he thought of Adiva. “Oh, Adiva. Don’t you know that I was only doing all this to give you more?” But he

knew in his heart that he was lying to himself. He had done it all out of pride.

Ishmael lay crumpled for what seemed hours until the sound of crunching steps outside startled him. He leapt up, snatched a stick, and crept to the door. He flung it open with a loud creaking sound, but his grip loosened when he recognized his own men.

“You’ve come after all,” he said, wiping his sweaty brow.

“We’re hungry,” one of the men mumbled.

“Adiva’s gone,” he said, his voice cracking for only a second, “but I’ll cook you something.”

With that, Ishmael fed the men, explaining his observations about the unicorns to surprised ears while they ate. He enjoyed the men’s attention and was soon plotting the capture of more unicorns.

Who needs Adiva when there are more unicorns to harvest?

With the appearance of his men, Ishmael had lost all remorse.

Chapter Twenty-Two
The Final Battle

For days, the unicorns huddled together, hidden in the depths of the sombre gray forest, waiting for the backlash of Zackary's foolhardiness. Zackary sulked outside of the group, gazing to the mountains beyond. Azaria felt sorry for his cousin, but knew he had to be firm.

Several days later, they came. Azaria saw them from afar – Ishmael and his cronies moving steadily toward the unicorns' hiding place.

"Camouflage!" he cried.

Within seconds, the unicorns blended into the landscape, scarcely breathing.

Ishmael drew up, smirking.

"Stinks like live unicorn," he said, scrunching up his nose like a rat. He turned to his cronies, sneering. "Must be one around here somewhere. Hmmm ... now let's see."

He raised his bow and pulled an arrow from his quill. Drawing the arrow back, he aimed at a rock. It whistled through the air and struck its mark with a smack. A wild-eyed unicorn burst forth from what had been the boulder. It whinnied and galloped away. His heart pounding, Azaria dared not breathe.

With a loud snap, Ishmael released another arrow into a large stump. Angry as a wildcat, Polaris sprang forward, the arrow thrust in his side.

"Fly!" the Great Stallion roared.

Unicorns erupted from the trees, rocks, and bushes after their leader. They rode the wind, their neighs piercing the air until they arrived a safe distance away. There they stopped, gasping for breath, their faces filled with terror. Azaria did a quick count – there were five casualties.

“Quickly,” ordered Aurora. “We must heal the wounded.”

The mares moved in and tended to the injured.

“Ishmael’s figured it all out,” saidAzaria, puffing. “He knows we’re not spirits, and now he’s convinced the others.”

Polaris shook, his eyes rolled back. “So then all we can do is flee.”

“I’m afraid so.” Azaria said. “When we see them coming, we mustn’t camouflage anymore. So long as they can smell us, they’ll be able to find us. We have to escape first, and then blend later when we’re outside of their vision.”

“Then so be it,” said Polaris, struggling to catch his breath.

He’s too old for this. I have to protect him. He’s not like the father I’ve always known.

The chase continued, the humans in hot pursuit, the unicorns barely escaping. Three more mares were hit. Taking just enough time to heal their wounds, they fled once again.

“How long can this go on?” asked Aurora after several hours. “We mares carrying foals need rest.”

“I don’t know,” said Polaris, his voice strained.

“Father, we can lure the humans from the herd if we outsmart them,” said Azaria. “If we distract them with a few of the young stallions, then the mares can slip away.”

“I agree,” said Aurora, drawing up close to her mate. “We really need to get to safety or we’ll lose the foals.”

“Alright, let’s do it.”

Aurora led the mares away, while Azaria gathered up his buddies and explained the plan.

Zackary smiled. “That’s my kind of fun. Thanks for including me,” he said, his gaze lowering to the ground.

“You’re welcome,” said Azaria. “And Zackary ... we all make mistakes, you know. Yours just happened to be a very dangerous one. It’s all forgotten.”

Zackary gave a humble smile. “Thanks,” he mumbled.

The young unicorns lay in wait, camouflaged until they heard the clip-clopping of the horses’ hooves against the rough stones.

“Now!” commanded Azaria, dropping his camouflage and letting out a mocking whinny. Ishmael drew his weapon.

“Over here, buddy,” called Zackary, neighing on Ishmael’s left.

“What?” said Ishmael, glancing at Zackary, and then back to Azaria. He released the arrow in Azaria’s direction, but the unicorn was already gone. Turning back, Ishmael found Zackary missing too. Then Gaelan appeared in the forefront, Azaria opposite him. Bewildered, Ishmael aimed and missed again.

“What the ... What’s going on here?” he grumbled.

“I don’t know, boss,” said one of the men. “They just keep disappearing.”

“Keep chasing them!” commanded Ishmael.

The hunt continued for several hours until the sun sank low in the sky and the humans pulled up their horses.

“Let’s call it day. We’ll try again tomorrow when the light’s better,” Azaria heard Ishmael say.

When the men had laid out their camp and settled for the night, Azaria addressed his fellow stallions. “Let’s go on a little further ahead. We can take turns sleeping. But one of us must keep watch at all times.” He turned to Zackary. “Do you want to go first?”

“Be glad to,” said Zackary.

“Then you must stay hidden close to the trail while we sleep among the trees.”

“Yes, sir,” Zackary said, his mouth stretched into a proud grin.

The young stallions kept vigil through the night, changing sentries every few hours. Azaria was the last to keep watch at dawn when the tell-tale sign of smoke curling high into the sky announced the humans were awake.

“All up, guys,” he commanded. “They’ll soon be here.”

Despite their grogginess, the unicorns came to life, the confused scramble of their hooves beating the ground. Azaria waited and listened until he saw the sign he was looking for – the mushroom-shaped cloud.

“You see that big puff of smoke? It means they’re putting out the fire. It’s time.”

The unicorns placed themselves strategically and waited.

The plodding sound of the horse’s hooves echoing in the mountains reached them long before the humans did. Azaria gave the signal and the game began again — the crisscrossing and zigzagging.

“Hey buddy, over here!” Zackary mocked.

“No, over here,” Nathaniel brayed.

Ishmael’s arrow flew, barely grazing Zackary.

Gaelan dove past Zackary, galloping to his left. “*That* I don’t like. Try *me*,” he called.

“No, me,” hooted Azaria.

Again, the arrow whizzed through the air, this time striking Gaelan full in the chest.

“Fly!” Azaria cried. “They’re onto us.”

The group retreated full force up the pathway until they were a safe distance from the humans. They only paused long enough to heal Gaelan.

“Father,” said Azaria, “we need to get as far away from this madman as possible. He’s too smart.”

“I’m afraid you’re right,” said Polaris.

The clatter of hooves grew louder. Again, the unicorns escaped. But the humans kept advancing.

“Father, they’re getting too close to the mares. We need to do something quick,” Azaria warned.

Polaris looked beaten. “I know. Go ahead and warn them. I’ll stay behind. If the humans see someone who seems like an easy target, they’ll leave the rest alone.”

“But that means you could be killed.” Azaria gulped, fighting back the shock of what his sire was proposing. “You can’t go alone.”

“Azaria, I’m old now. I’ve been leader for a long time. The herd doesn’t need me anymore. They need someone strong and young like you. I want you to follow in my footsteps and keep this herd alive.”

“Does that mean ...?” Azaria gave his sire an incredulous stare.

“Yes it does. I knew it would be you when you were very young. You showed signs. Remember the time I took you up the mountain top?”

Azaria nodded.

“I said you *might* be Great Stallion someday, but I knew even then it would be you.”

“But Father, I need you. We all do. You can’t just –”

“It’s the only way, my son.”

“No –”

“Things have changed, Azaria. This is my last order. Now stand at attention.”

Azaria raised himself to his full height, knowing it was the most important moment of his life, though probably the saddest.

Polaris bowed his head and placed his horn on Azaria's forehead. "I name you the Great Stallion over all the herds," he said in the formal voice he used with Saul so long ago. "Go forth and take your place as leader. Protect the mares, and above all, stay far from the humans."

Azaria stared at his father in disbelief, and then trotted to where the young stallions awaited him. "Fly!" he ordered, rearing high into the air. "To the mares. They've rested and we must move them out!"

"But ..." argued the stallions, "the humans will only follow us."

"Polaris' orders!" he shouted.

Azaria flew, his head pushed forward to hide the tears. Anger and rage spurred him onward at greater speed. Flying to the top of the ridge, he turned one last time and peered down at the scene below as the others soared by. He saw the arrow whiz through the air and strike Polaris in the heart when he reared to fight off the humans. He saw the noble leader's stunned expression as his muscles suddenly collapsed, and he crumpled to the ground. Azaria's heart broke. His eyes stung. But he wasn't ready for what came next. Before Polaris breathed his last breath, Ishmael sawed off his horn, brandishing it to the victory cries of his cronies. Choked, Azaria turned away, his mind made up.

He flew, enraged, breaking through brambles and brush, his coat covered in cuts and bruises. He galloped through mud, slipped and fell on his side. Rising again, he realized he had sprained his hock. Testing the ankle a few times, he grimaced with pain, but continued.

"I have to find the herd quickly or I'm doomed," he whispered.

He broke into a canter, keeping the weight off the wounded leg.

The moon had risen, casting long eerie shadows by the time Azaria arrived in the canyon where the herd hid. He stumbled, exhausted, into the

group, and was immediately surrounded by anxious unicorns, mumbling and whinnying at once.

“Leave him be,” ordered Aurora, “until he’s been looked after. There’ll be time for questions later.”

Aurora tended to his flesh wounds, and Gaelan manipulated his hock. Azaria flinched until the heat of Galen’s horn relieved the injury. Cassi and Jemmi led him to the cool water of the lake where they washed away the mud and blood.

After he rested, he turned to Aurora. “Father is dead, Mother.” He whispered the words.

Aurora broke into sobs and pressed her face against his. Azaria returned the gesture and together they cried. When he was done shedding tears, he gathered up his courage and stood before the herd, his muscles still twitching with fatigue.

“Unicorns,” he said, his voice tired, but powerful. “It is with sadness that I must announce our Great Stallion, Polaris, has died.” He paused and swallowed. “He gave up his life so we could live on; he said it was what was meant to be.”

The herd listened, ears pricked forward as Azaria told of his father’s bravery, how he met the humans, and how they had murdered and desecrated his body. The unicorns lamented, their mournful cries echoing in the mountains until Azaria silenced them.

“Quiet! All of you. Do you want them to find us?” he shouted.

They stared in shock at his fierce order.

“Our lives have changed forever! Do you understand that?”

The softest of hiccoughs could be heard.

His gaze swept over the crowd. “We can never return to our valley. Ever! We must travel further and further into the woods where the humans

can’t find us.”

The mares whimpered, eyes wide with fright.

Azaria continued. “Tonight, before Polaris died, he named me Great Stallion. And it’s on this night, I will begin a new legacy – *my* legacy, the Legacy of Azaria, and that means you shall all pledge allegiance to flee the humans until the end of time. And when the foals are born, we shall train them in the arts of Darius as soon as they are able.”

Dumfounded, they awaited his words. Not a sneeze or snort was heard.

Azaria continued, “And now as your new leader, I command you to bow your heads and take your vows.”

Each unicorn lowered its head, pointing its horn toward Azaria. Together, they vowed their allegiance, their unicorn voices trembling with emotion. Then Azaria began a new chant, his voice rising above the others’.

“We will survive.”

“We will survive,” the herd joined in, the power of the words overtaking them as they recited. It rose to a crescendo, and then died down.

Then one by one as they finished, they turned to follow Azaria, beginning their exodus, their heads held high.

Chapter Twenty-Three
The Destruction

Ishmael and his men burst into town, lightning bolts shattering the quiet before a storm. He waved Polaris' horn high in the air like a victory sword, shouting as he rode. His men followed, whooping and hollering, their hair flying like banners.

A loud scream filled the air when they entered the town, their horses' hooves clattering against the stone street.

"He's killed another one!" a woman shrieked, snatching her baby as she hurried to escape the galloping horses.

"The curse!" cried an old man hoisting himself up with his walking stick.

The streets flooded with terrified townsfolk.

"He's done it again. Imprison him," someone else cried out.

"Stone him!" An old lady spat the words like venom.

The cloth merchant shouted, "Yes, it's our only chance to break the curse. Stone him!"

"No!" cried Ishmael. "I tell you there are no spirits. They're alive. I have the Great Stallion's horn to prove it. Do you hear me? The Great Stallion! Do you know how much power there is in this horn?" He descended his foaming horse in one gallant swoop.

"Enough power to destroy us with his wrath. The town will be demolished!" shouted the cloth merchant again. "Stone him!"

"Stone him, stone him, stone him," the people began chanting, their voices rising to frenzy.

“Ask my men. They’re my witnesses,” Ishmael shouted over the voices, still sure of himself. He turned to his cronies and caught his breath. They had galloped away with *his* horses.

“Stone him, stone him, stone him!” the town folk’s cries grew more urgent.

A grizzled man picked up the first rock and hurled it at Ishmael. It left an angry, red mark on his arm. An enraged woman flung a sharp-edged stone that ripped his clothing. Ishmael cried in pain. Pebbles flew like hailstones and battered his face. Drops of blood oozed from his skin.

Ishmael ducked, his arms protecting his skull. “I tell you there are no spirits. They’re just unicorns! They’re like horses!” he shrieked in agony.

The townsfolk continued to pelt him with stones until, from the din, arose a tiny, but strong voice – the voice of a child.

“Stop!” she shouted. The noise quieted down a bit. “Stop!” she commanded again. The mob’s noise faded as though the child’s voice had cast a spell. The tiny girl pushed through the crowd, rose onto the damaged statue of Ishmael and cried, “Stop it, all of you. Don’t kill him. He’s my daddy!”

Her large soulful eyes challenged them, and her bottom lip trembled. Ishmael’s heart broke in two as he stared back at those precious brown eyes.

“Ali!” he cried, his heart filled with love. “Ali, come here.”

The child turned and glared at her father, defiant. Then she faced the crowd. “You want to stone my daddy because he killed the unicorns? Well, I can make him stop.”

The townsfolk stood with bated breath, awaiting the bewitching child’s next words.

Adiva pushed through the mob, and climbed beside her.

“Ali is right. Ishmael has committed no more than the crimes of pride and greed. He doesn’t merit stoning for such a thing. Besides, you’ve all committed evil deeds too – every one of you. Remember the time of the fireball? Many of you stole, and some of you even killed. You’re no better than him. I say we find an appropriate punishment, one that is long-lasting.”

“But how will we know he won’t murder another unicorn?” shouted the merchant, the fire in his eyes gone.

“Because *we’ll* look after him and bring him food.” She turned and faced Ishmael, her eyes firm. “He’ll stay in his house and will never venture into town again.”

“But the curse,” wailed an old woman. “He has unleashed a curse on this town.”

The mob broke into angry mumbling again.

Adiva hushed them. “So long as he remains far away, the curse won’t touch us. And as for the horn, we’ll lock it away until another plague hits our town. It’ll then be put to good use so that the Great Stallion’s death will have had meaning. It’ll keep our people alive.”

The crowd waited in silence.

“Are there any objections?” she demanded, her voice as powerful as a judge’s.

Still the crowd remained quiet.

She frowned at the mob and waved an arm. “Then go now – all of you. There will be no stoning today.”

The streets emptied, revealing the rubble left behind.

Ali and Adiva walked Ishmael along the dusty road to his home, and cleaned his wounds.

“Adiva, please come back. I love you. And Ali – you’re such a strong little girl. I just didn’t think –” He begged.

Waving him away, Adiva said, “You’ve had many chances and now you must face what you’ve done alone.”

“No. Please don’t leave me. I don’t want to be by myself,” he pleaded, his voice trembling.

“You should have told us that before. It’s too late now.”

She took Ali’s hand, and the two turned and walked down the path to the town, the little girl glancing back one last time at her father.

That night, Ishmael sat alone in the darkness of his home, mulling over the day’s events.

“No one understands me,” he muttered to himself. “If they had just taken the time to listen, they might have figured out what I was saying. They’re fools – *all of them!”*

The sound of a horse scraping the ground caught his attention.

“Ah, the horses. Must feed them.”

Stepping outside, he remembered his cronies had escaped with their mounts. His horse too had fled during the altercation. Yet he heard the distinct snort of an equine sneeze.

“What the...” he said as he turned searching for the source of the sounds.

Shimmering before his eyes, the form of a unicorn materialized, pawing the ground. In the mist he could see other unicorns too, moving restlessly behind it.

“I know you’re not spirits!” He guffawed, flinging a stone in their direction. It passed right through them. Picking up several other rocks, he cast them at the unicorns, but again, they sailed right through.

Ishmael turned his attention again to the first one when it dawned on him. “You’re the mare, the one who saved my Ali,” he said, his voice high.

The mare took two menacing steps forward and snorted. Ishmael backed up, his eyes wide with terror.

“I’m sorry! I should have spared you, but all I could think of was the gold.”

The unicorn pawed again and moved a few steps closer. The other unicorns’ neighs grew louder, their furious voices rumbling.

“No! Leave me be!” he cried.

Ishmael flew to the door and slammed it shut, sweat pouring from his body.

I must be seeing things. If I wait long enough, they’ll go away. Dear gods, have I gone mad?

He hid himself in the corner of his room, cowering under a blanket. The unicorns broke into their eerie but strange song. It grew louder and louder until Ishmael could stand it no longer.

“Stop,” he shouted. “STOP! STOP!” He curled up, covering his ears. The unicorns sang their ghostly music until the early light of dawn faded them away. But it wasn’t over. They returned the next night, and the next, and the next after that. Ishmael realized he would be haunted until his death for his crimes.

He grew weaker and more nervous every day. His dark hair and beard turned white, and he grew very thin, often mumbling to himself as he struggled through each hour.

Finally, one morning, when Ali and Adiva came to deliver his food, they found him lying in his bed, his eyes staring in horror, his chest still. Ishmael had died a haunted man.

Chapter Twenty-Four
Darius' Exodus

Darius groaned in his sleep. His muscles twitched, and his tail moved as images of desperate unicorns flooded his mind – unicorns fleeing for their very lives. And Polaris ... Darius jerked awake, pushing himself up with his huge forelegs.

"Polaris is dead," he whispered the shocking words aloud, his eyes staring out into the early dawn. Tears rolled down his immense cheek and his sides heaved. "Ah, Polaris."

Memories swept through his mind of the day when the Great Stallion, Azaria, and Gaelan had found him while Maresa lay dying, and how they had taken him back to their valley and raised him. Polaris had been like a sire to him, and now he was gone.

"You saved my life but I wasn't there to save yours."

More giant tears slid down his cheeks and landed with a kerplop on the leaves below.

After what seemed a long time, the trickle in his eyes lessened and he heaved a huge sigh.

"The unicorns are all right. They've escaped ... with Azaria leading!" Wonder filled Darius when he spoke the last few words, and he smiled. "I knew you'd win the battle, Azaria. I just knew it." He shifted. "But what about me? Sooner or later, the humans will migrate to this valley and find me."

The dinosaur gazed at the horizon where the sun rose, and he breathed in the fresh scent of the succulent ferns and trees surrounding him. Memories of a lush valley abounding with dinosaurs filled his mind, of

days when his playmates were giant reptiles, of Saul the leader, even the Rexus ... until the fireball destroyed them all. Darius sighed again. He knew it was time to move on, and that this would be the last sunrise he'd watch from his childhood home.

Waiting until nightfall, he began the long journey. He trudged along for several hours, enjoying the coolness of the air. Cicadas and frogs buzzed and croaked in rhythm, lending tranquility to the darkness. The fresh scent of flowers added a magic to his solitude. After a while, the sound of water bubbling lured him, and he changed his course.

Finding the stream, he dipped his head in, taking in the sweet, cold, life-giving fluid. It cooled his legs and soothed his tongue. He drank for a long time, and then sat on his haunches to rest. He took in the beauty of the night, the magic of the forest regrown, the splendour of the mountains.

Ah, the mountains.

Following the slope with his eyes, he traced the incline until he reached the line where the trees thinned. He drew in a sharp breath.

It's them!

Tiny white dots pushed their way up the slope in the moonlight.

Darius nearly called out, but stopped.

I can't risk the humans hearing me.

He watched them climb higher and higher, his breath quickening. "Go, unicorns, go!" he said.

A sob caught in his throat. How he wished he could follow them to their new home – anything to avoid the life of solitude that lay before him.

Maybe I can.

Darius took a few steps forward, his giant feet shuffling on the stones of the riverbank, undecided, and then stopped and lowered his head. He knew it wasn't meant to be and that he had to continue on alone. It was his

fate. Groaning, he blinked back tears and prepared to continue on his journey – until something caught his eye.

One of the white specks had stopped and turned. Darius watched, his heart racing, as one by one, the unicorns faced him.

They see me!

The dinosaur stared in wonderment. Though they were but mere white specks in the moonlight, he knew without a doubt they were pointing their horns at him as they did for the Great Stallion and Mohala.

They're honouring me! Me! As though I were Polaris!

His heart filled with elation.

It wasn't all for nothing!

He stood up to his full height and bowed his head in return. Then he whispered, "Farewell, my friends."

The white specks lingered as though reluctant to leave. Then their leader turned and led them up the steep slope.

The End

Epilogue

Dear readers,

In this novel, I describe the near extinction of the mythical creature, the unicorn, at the hands of the humans. However, this story is not really fantasy. The elephant and rhinoceros endure this everyday. Poachers, in impoverished African countries kill thousands of elephants and rhinos each year for their tusks and horns bound for Asian markets.

Since 1979, the elephant population has declined from 1.3 million to 400,000 today. That means each year, some 35,000 elephants are destroyed. Proof is the 30 tons if illegal ivory seized around the world each year. It has been estimated that 70% of the elephant population has been massacred over the past ten years.

The rhino population has decreased significantly as well with 1,215 poached in 2014 alone. That equates to one rhino killed every eight hours, their horns smuggled into China and Vietnam as medicinal cures for cancer and other ailments even though they've been proven to contain no medicinal value whatsoever. In 2011, the Western black rhino was declared extinct, and three other species declared endangered.

What can you do to help? Simple.

Never, ever buy anything made of ivory. If someone offers you a gift of jewelry or a carving made from a tusk, don't accept it – for any reason.

If you hear of anyone using rhinoceros horn as medicine, please share your knowledge about the endangered status of rhinos with them.

Support PACE, an organization that educates people in African communities on the conservation of wildlife. www.paceproject.net

Like Save the Rhino's FB page as well as Tusk Trust's to keep up-to-date on any news. https://www.facebook.com/savetherhinointernational. Tusk Trust is an organization begun in 1990 that has raised millions of

dollars in support of endangered species. In 2005, the Duke of Cambridge, Prince William, became a patron. http://www.tusk.org/about.asp. Prince William is also an ambassador to the organization, United for Wildlife. http://www.unitedforwildlife.org/#!/news

Remember, you can make a difference.

A Note to Teachers:

The Shadow of the Unicorn: The Legacy comes with a 36-page reproducible study guide (complete with answer key) free for download from Ms. de Montigny's website at: http://www.suzannedemontigny.com/books.php

Suzanne de Montigny wrote her first unicorn story at the age of twelve. Several years later, she discovered it in an old box in the basement, thus reigniting her love affair with unicorns. A teacher for over twenty years in Vancouver, B.C., she learned she could spin a good tale that kept kids and teachers asking for more. *The Shadow of the Unicorn: The Legacy,* is her first novel.

The Shadow of the Unicorn: The Legacy was the 2012 recipient of the Gold Global E-book Award for Best Fantasy/Alternate History. Her teen novel, A Town Bewitched was awarded first prize in the Dante Rossetti Award for Best Coming of Age Novel.

Suzanne lives in Burnaby, B.C. with the four loves of her life – her husband, two boys, and Buddy the dog.

Please visit Suzanne's website at: http://www.suzannedemontigny.com

You can also find her on Facebook at: https://facebook.com/unicorngirl52

And can follow her on Twitter at: https://twitter.com/sfierymountain

And last but not least, here is her blog: http://suzannesthoughtsfortheday.blogspot.ca